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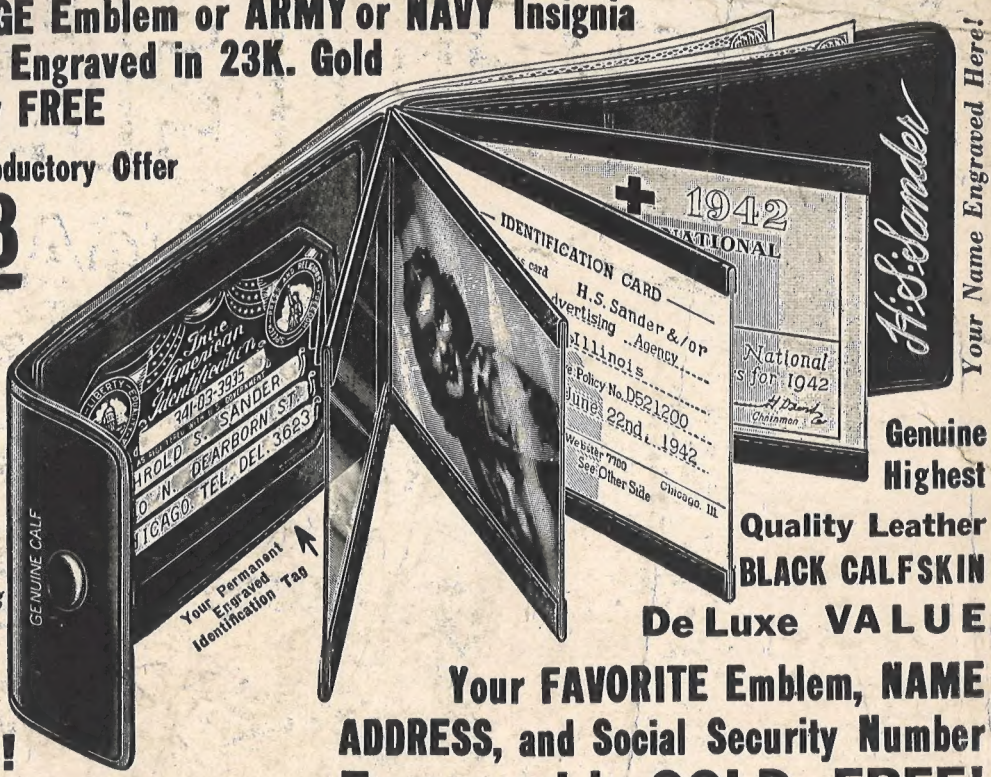

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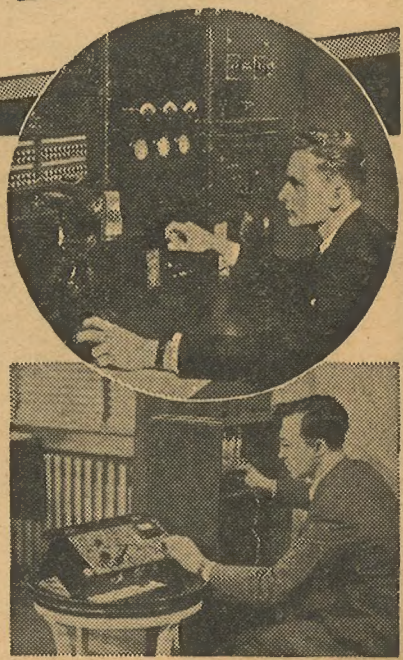

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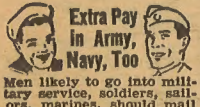

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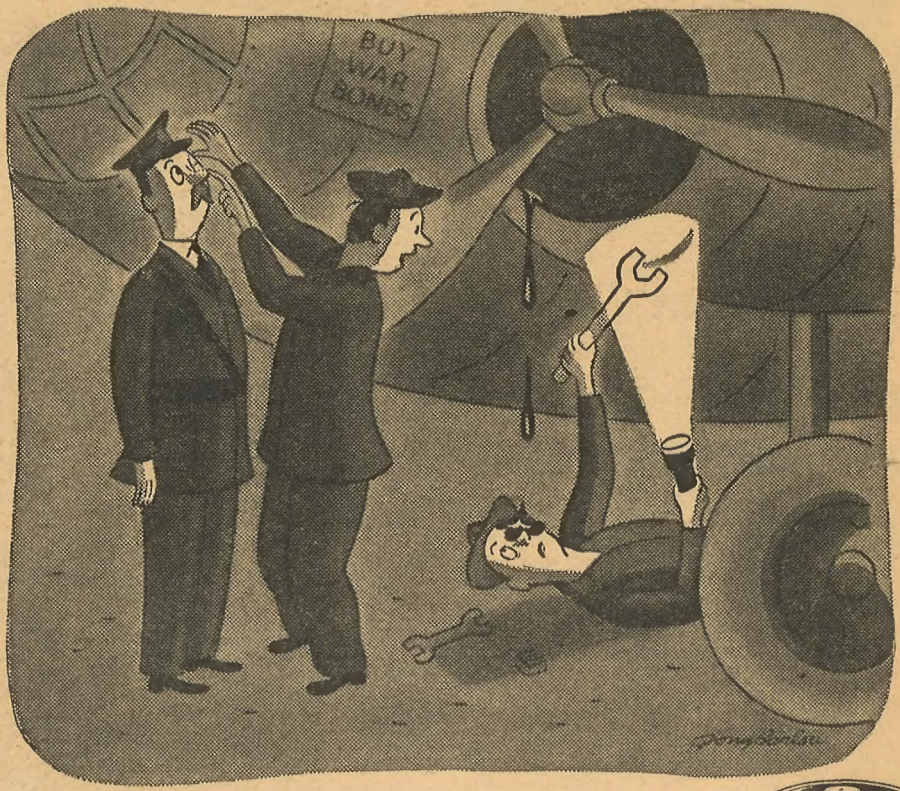

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MAY ISSUE PUBLISHED MARCH 31st!

VOLUME XXXV April, 1943 NUMBER 4

Two Complete Western Novels

Killer Without a Name.....Walt Coburn 8
Although the bounty-hunter who called himself Tate Skelton no longer crouches in the rim-rocks with his ready carbine, old-timers in Wyoming and Montana still get that cold feeling where their suspenders cross, as they ride the lonely, shadowed trails. . . .

Gun Gambler of the Big Muddy.....Tom Roan 40
High-stake gambler, quick-trigger duellist—and gentleman!—Captain Jesse Wilder mixed his hot blood with cold steel, from old New Orleans all the way to the savage buckskin frontier!

Two Western Novelettes

Blizzard Raiders.....Art Lawson 70
The same snowbound line-cabin that offered a last chance for life to Spur Whitney, was marked by Big Bill Miller to be the frozen tomb of all who entered its door!

Land Buccaneers of Francisquito.....Tom W. Blackburn 94
Nowhere on earth was young Clint Ord more assured of a warm and royal welcome than at the fabulous Rancho San Francisquito—until a hundred gold-mad claim-pirates greeted him at the once-friendly gates—with snarling lead!

Three Western Short Stories

Rope Trick.....Harry F. Olmsted 33
Hunger, thirst and despair brought death to Tex's companions—while he patiently wove the rope that might have saved them all!

Brotherhood of Battle.....Steve Herrington 62
Never tell Ed Dushane, Texan, that Pancho Villa's Dorados were a ragged gang of thieves and cut-throats—for he gambled his life to learn differently!

Home-Grown Terror!.....Lloyd Eric Reeve 86
What was the use, Johnny Braze asked, of trying to keep on the straight trail, when everyone knew he was just marking time—to kill?

—And—

Frontiersmen Who Made History.....Cedric W. Windas 6
It was typical of Sam Brannan, two-fisted pioneer, that he didn't wait for the '49 strike, before he brought his own kind of law to the roaring Californias!

In the Saddle.....A Department 107
Western frontier fiction goes to War!

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

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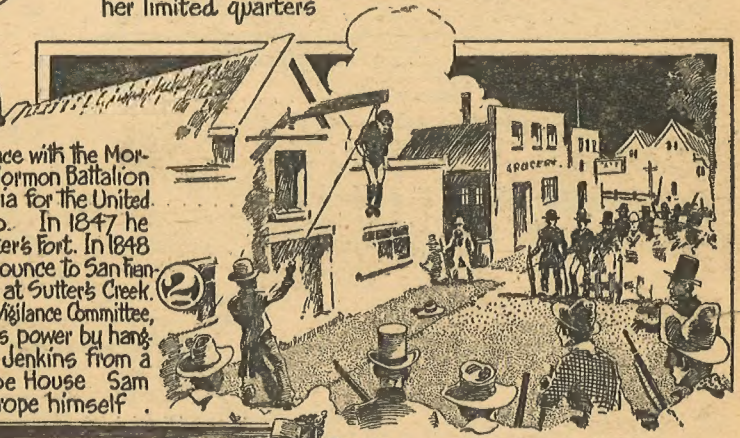
FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

SAM BRANNAN

Sam Brannan was the original "Forty-Niner." Not that he waited for the glamorous gold-strike at Sutter's Creek to begin his adventurous career, for as early as 1846 he brought a little vessel of 370 tons, the BROOKLYN, clear around Cape Horn, with about three hundred Mormon colonists crowded into her limited quarters



Sam soon fell from grace with the Mormon Church, but his Mormon Battalion helped to hold California for the United States against Mexico. In 1847 he opened a store at Sutter's Fort. In 1848 he was the first to announce to San Franciscans the gold-strike at Sutter's Creek. He organized the first Vigilance Committee, which demonstrated its power by hanging the infamous John Jenkins from a beam on the Old Adobe House Sam manipulated the hangrope himself.

In the early "50's", Brannan actually owned one-fifth of the city of San Francisco. He was an ardent Union patriot during the Civil War, and was remembered for his terrific fight with a Southern "slave-captain" in the old St. Nicholas Hotel
Later he went to Mexico with his own contingent of fightingmen to help Mexican patriots throw off the yoke of Maximilian.

He outfought a gang of renegades in Calistoga, being wounded eight times by the marauders before he finally drove them off. He organized the first San Francisco Fire Department, and presented it with the first fire-engine ever seen on the Pacific Coast.
There is hardly a locality in California but owes something to his genius for empire building, and though he died in San Diego in 1889, the Golden State has never forgotten her "Fighting Frontiersman of the Goldfields"

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A Hard-Hitting, Human Saga of the Old West

By

★ ★ WALT COBURN ★ ★

CHAPTER ONE

The Killer Draws Cards

HE HAD no memory of any father or mother, and since he could remember he was able to ride a horse and do ranch chores. When he was old enough to cut loose, he stole a horse and ran away from the ranch where he was doing a man's work for grub and a bed in the barn. It was typical of the

boy that he waited several years and planned it all out many times before he cut loose and drifted. Even then he had the cunning of a wolf cub.

He stole the best horse that rancher owned, and that was the last the rancher ever saw of the boy or his top horse. That was on Beef Creek, in Oklahoma Territory. The ranchers' Choctaw squaw said nothing about the hundred dollars she had hidden in a baking powder can under a loose board in the kitchen floor. The rancher knew nothing about the squaw's secret cache and until she found the money gone—along with the squawman's top horse, she hadn't suspected that the boy knew she had a money cache.

That was about the time the Dalton gang was blazing their renegade trail. So the boy took for himself the name of Buck Dalton. He altered the brand on the stolen horse, picking as neat a hair brand on the big gelding's shoulder as any horse thief could do. Then he swapped the stolen gelding to a rancher a hundred miles from the Beef Creek ranch.

When he forked his new horse, he called himself Hank James and claimed he was a nephew of Jesse James. He got a job wrangling horses for a big cow outfit on the Pecos River in Texas and held it through the calf and beef roundups. He swapped horses again and rode on to a new range. It was only after he was gone and his head start was a long one, that the cowpunchers found out he had raided their warsacks and taken what he wanted.

He blotted the brand on his new horse and drifted fast and far. He changed his name to Joe Bass and said he was the son of Sam Bass, the outlaw.

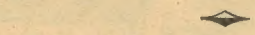
He was sixteen years old when he went up the trail with one of the XIT herds and he told them his name was Jack Chisum, that he was a nephew of John Chisum, the big cowman and trail drover.

He wintered in Montana under the name of Jack Chisum and spent the long snowed-in months feeding cattle and chopping open water holes. During the long winter nights he read everything he could find there at the line camp and made a thousand and one plans for a real outlaw career.

When the warm chinook winds cut the snowdrifts in the spring and the green grass was high in the coulees, it was time to drift yonderly. He helped himself to the best horse in the remuda and rode south into the badlands. He had heard of a white whiskered old hermit rancher who had panned the creeks and sandbars along the river for gold. This old man swapped his gold dust and nuggets for real money but distrusted banks because he could neither read nor write. Everybody in the country knew about the miserly old rancher.

Cranky and suspicious as the old man was, the easy grin of the seventeen year old boy allayed his suspicions. The boy rapped him over the head with a stick of stovewood. When the old man woke up he found himself lying on the cabin floor, tied hand and foot. The tow headed boy grinned at him. Then he pulled off the old man's boots and socks and burned the soles of the hermit's feet until he finally weakened and told where his money was cached.

The boy had five thousand dollars shoved in his pockets when he left the old man to get loose as best he could, and rode on into the heart of the badlands. He called himself Slim Curry now and claimed to be the youngest brother of the notorious outlaw Kid Curry. He rode into the Hole in the Wall under that name. And it was then and there at the Hole in the Wall that he made the mistake that was to alter his headlong but crafty career.



THE Hole in the Wall was no easy place for any man to ride into. A couple of heavily armed men halted the tall, slim cowboy riding a good looking gelding with a blotted brand. The young cowboy had hair the color of a new hard twist saddle rope, and the grin on his tanned face was frank and disarming. But the grin never reached as far as his eyes. They looked him over with hard, unsmiling scrutiny. His six-shooter and saddle gun and filled cartridge belt. The way he sat his horse. And they took a good look at the big, sweat marked bay gelding with the blotched brand.

"Who are you, button? What makes

you think you kin ride in like you belonged here?"

"I'm Kid Curry's youngest brother, Slim Curry. Our real name is Logan. The Kid's real name is Harvey. My two other brothers is named Johnny and Loney. Big Nose George Curry ain't no real kin to us Curry boys."

One of the two outlaws who had stopped him was husky and tow headed with a square jawed face and a flat grin and hard gray-blue eyes.

The other outlaw was smaller, dark complexioned, with a week's growth of wiry black whiskers.

The two outlaws looked at one another. The tow headed outlaw grinned. The smaller man was not grinning.

"Step off, Slim," said the smaller man. "You know that horse, Butch?"

"The blotched brand will be Circle C. Had him in my string once. Name is Treasure Box. Your brother Harvey said to step off, Slim. Better git down. Mebbeyso he wants to kiss yuh."

The drifting young cowboy of many aliases quit grinning. The cocky way he sat his saddle was gone. He was afraid to get off. Afraid to make a gun move. Afraid to try for a getaway. He knew who these two outlaws must be, now, when it was too late to do anything about it.

The grinning man with the tawny mustache was Butch Cassidy, leader of the Wild Bunch. And the smaller man with the black whiskers was none other than the notorious and deadly Kid Curry.

"I—" he gulped, "it was a sorta joke. . . ."

Kid Curry crowded his horse close. He reached out and yanked the seventeen year old would-be outlaw from his saddle. And was on the ground by the time the tall, slim young drifter had scrambled to his feet.

Kid Curry was as quick as a cat. He spent hours turning flips and hand springs to keep himself limber. He was limber and fast and hard to whip. Angered, he had a vicious temper, and he was mad now.

It took Kid Curry less than five minutes to get his job done. At the end of those five minutes the young would-be outlaw lay on the ground, blood trickling from his smashed mouth and spilling from a broken nose. Both his eyes were swelling shut. He lay there, whipped and beaten, spitting blood and dirt, sobbing and begging for mercy.

Kid Curry had pulled a couple of thick rolls of money from the whipped young cowpuncher's pockets. He unrolled the money and estimated the amount.

"Where'd you git this?" He emphasized the question with a hard kick. "Don't lie."

"That damned old skinflint at the mouth of Sand Crick owed me back wages," the boy started to lie. "He wouldn't pay me. So I—"

Kid Curry kicked him in the belly. "When you git your wind back, talk the truth."

He blubbered out the truth then. Kid Curry pocketed the money.

"If he didn't murder ol' Uncle Joe, we'll give him back his money, next time we stop at Sand Crick. Set this thing on that gruya pack mule, Butch. Bareback. Git him outa my sight before I git over bein' chicken-hearted and kill the lyin' whelp."

The young drifter left the entrance to the Hole in the Wall riding bareback on an ornery, stiff-necked, mouse-colored mule. His pockets were empty, his belt and six-shooter no longer were buckled around his lean flanks. Shamed, beaten, humiliated, driven from the Outlaw Trail, he sobbed and swore that someday he would cut the sign of Kid Curry and kill him where he found him. Kill that grinning Butch Cassidy, too! That beating and humiliation had further warped his heart and brain and his only thoughts now turned into a treacherous channel for revenge.

Before he slipped into a Wyoming ranch and left the gruya mule, stealing a carbine and the best saddle in the barn and was riding away into the night, he had mapped his future. He was turning that bad mistake into a sinister profit. There was the patience of an Indian in his make-up. Patience and a wolfish cunning.

He knew the bite of the wolf trap now. He'd never get caught again. He'd train himself for what he had to do. Five years was not too long to wait.

He was all done with this kid business of taking phoney outlaw names. He'd take the name of that rancher on Beef Creek, in Oklahoma. Tate Skelton. He'd get a cowpunching job and work at it. Learn everything there was to learn about cattle and horses and men. And until he was ready to turn back to the Outlaw Trail, he was giving it a wide berth.

From now on he was playing the game close to his belly. No fourflushing or bluffing. He'd keep his mouth shut and not talk out of turn. Make men like him but give no man his friendship. Lay off the petty stealing and keep out of trouble. But he'd learn how to handle himself in any kind of fight. But he'd never get into a fight that he had a chance of losing. He'd never reach for his gun until he was ready to kill with it. He'd never give the other man an even break. If the man was a faster gun-slinger, then he'd wait until the sign was right and shoot his man in the back.

It might have been that he would have turned out differently in a more suitable environment, with a decent home and surroundings, a mother's care and a real boyhood. He'd never played boys' games. He dildn't know how to laugh at kid jokes. He could cuss and drink whiskey, smoke and chew tobacco like a man. His idea of something to laugh at was a practical joke that caused somebody else humiliation or pain.

The rancher on Beef Creek had owned an old pensioned cowhorse that had gone blind and toothless with old age. The rancher didn't have the heart to put that old cow pony out of its misery.

The boy had learned to ride on that cow horse. But he had taken a nosebag full of oats and hung it on the old horse's head. And when the horse lowered its head the boy had shoved the muzzle of the rancher's .45 six-shooter into the horse's ear and pulled the trigger. He was so young and small then that the recoil of the big .45 had kicked the gun out of his two hands.

ABOUT two weeks later, the owner of the horse he was stealing had heard sounds in the barn about midnight. He'd shown up in a flannel nightshirt, his hat and boots on and a gun in his hand just as the horse thief was jerking his saddle cinch tight. He made an easy target there in the moonlight as he came out of his log house towards the barn.

Young Tate Skelton crouched in the black shadows of the barn. He levered a cartridge into his stolen saddle carbine and lined his sights against the white moonlight. He pulled the trigger. The .30-30 bullet struck the man square between the eyes.

"A bull's eye," Tate Skelton grinned flatly, levering out the smoking shell and sliding a fresh cartridge into the breech. "He looked shore comical in that damn' nightshirt."

He mounted his stolen horse. A light showed at the log house. The door opened and a girl about fifteen or sixteen years old stood there in the doorway holding a lighted lamp. She had her heavy, tawny dark golden hair parted in the middle and plaited into two heavy braids that hung down below her waist. Her tanned face had lost its healthy color so that her skin was the color of ivory. Her eyes looked dark in the lamplight.

The young killer sat his stolen horse, his carbine in his hand, staring fascinated at the nightgowned girl with the lamp. He'd talked and danced with a lot of girls. But none of them had been like that girl with the golden braids.

He was sorry now that he'd killed her father.

It wasn't because he felt any regret about committing murder, or because he felt pity for the girl. But he had spoiled his chances of meeting this girl. He wanted to get a closer look at her, talk her into liking him, then make love to her. But that .30-30 bullet had made that impossible. He'd better hightail it right now.

He pulled the brim of his hat down to hide his face. Then he spurred out of the barn and off into the night. The girl dropped the lamp and screamed. He could still hear her screaming as he rode out of sight without looking back.

When he was a few miles from the little ranch he pulled the sweating, blowing horse down to a running walk. He rolled and lit a cigarette and let the horse follow

a trail that twisted through the broken hills. And as he pulled tobacco smoke into his lungs and let it drift out through his mouth and nostrils, he made new plans.

His plans were cut out in a bold pattern. But there was a cunning craftsmanship tempering its boldness.

Off in the far distance a train whistled. He knew the country. Knew that he was not far from Rock Springs, Wyoming. Rock Springs was on the railroad. It was close to the outlaw hideout called Brown's Hole, where the northeast corner of Utah met the northeast corner of Colorado and that corner of the two states was dead on the southern border of Wyoming.

Renegades who rode the Outlaw Trail stopped at Rock Springs to take on forty rod whiskey and swing the honkytonk girls. Strangers rode into town and out again and nobody paid them much attention. Rock Springs was a safe town. But he had to get rid of this horse with its murdered owner's brand.

He called it more than just luck when he rode up on a grazing bunch of loose horses. He told himself that the cards were dropping into his hand. A short, swift race and a sure loop and he had roped himself a fresh horse.

He spent about an hour drifting the murdered man's horse back towards its home ranch. The horse would do the rest. In a day or two it would be showing up at its barn or the pasture gate.

CHAPTER TWO

"A Tough Town For a Stranger"

HE MADE himself believe that again more than just fool luck when he reached the stockyards at Rock Springs and found a round-up outfit loading cattle in the gray dawn. He watched from a safe distance for a little while. Then he rode into town and stopped at the feed and livery barn. The barn man was not around.

He turned his stolen horse loose and watched it head for the open country. Then he found an empty gunnysack. He shoved his saddle and blanket and bridle and chaps and spurs into the big gunnysack and slinging it over his shoulder, he headed for the biggest saloon on the main street.

"I'm broke," he told the saloonman. "Lookin' for a job. If you'll let me have ten bucks on my outfit. . . ."

"The Box X is loadin' now," the saloonman told him. "First shipment. Some of the cowhands will be quittin'. They'll spend a day or two paintin' the town before they pull out. Plenty of free drinks. Put your outfit in the office at the front of the bar. Door's unlocked. You kin git it when the wagon boss puts you on."

He shoved a couple of five dollar bills across the bar and set out the bar bottle and two glasses. Then he took a small ledger from the back bar and wet the end of a stubby pencil.

"What's the name?"

"Tate Skelton." His wide grin never got as far as his cold steel gray eyes. "You'll git to know me plenty. I aim to locate around here for awhile. Mebbyso take up a homestead or file a desert claim. Build me an outfit of my own."

"You better grow whiskers before you go filin' on any hunk of land, son. By rights it's agin' the law to serve minors."

Tate Skelton's grin flattened. The saloonman got a little shock when he got a straight look at his lone customer's eyes. His whiskey chuckle rattled and died in his thick throat.

"Take it easy, cowboy." He reached under the bar for the heavy wooden mallet known as a bung starter. "Drink up and have another on the house. I don't give a damn if you're sixteen or sixty."

"I'm old enough," said Tate Skelton, "to take my own part. I bin doin' it since I was a baby."

He drained his drink and poured a second and downed it without blinking as the raw whiskey went down his throat into an empty belly. He pocketed one of the fives and shoved the other across the bar.

"Now I'll buy. You're drinkin' on me, mister. You got my name. What's yours?"

"Fatty Jones. I own the place. Bought it when I finished the little part of a life stretch in the Wyoming pen for killin' three men. Had the cash money planted

where I'd find it when I come out. I've had to kill two men since I opened up here at Rock Springs. I don't like killin' men. Drink hearty, Tate Skelton. And take it easy."

The sheriff came in while they were drinking. He sized Tate Skelton up briefly but without missing a detail. Then he filled a glass with whiskey and drank it. He was wearing spurs and a pair of chaps.

"I'll take along a pint, Fatty."

"Business trip, Sheriff," grinned the big, red faced saloonman.

"I'm turnin' the town over to the Box X outfit. Don't want the boys to feel cramped." A grin spread across his leathery face. He looked straight at the only other customer on the paying side of the bar.

"Stranger, ain't you?"

"First time I was ever here," was the cautious reply. "I didn't see you when I dropped off the train."

"I meet every train I kin," said the sheriff. "You didn't git off any of 'em."

"You meet that string of empty cattle cars they're loadin' now," asked Tate Skelton shrewdly, "when it pulled in before daylight?"

"Nope. Got me there," admitted the peace officer. "What's your name and where you from?"

"Tate Skelton. I come from Oklahoma."

"His saddle's in a sack behind the bar," said Fatty Jones. "Loaned him ten bucks on it. I'm gittin' him a job with the Box X."

"Got a bedroll?" asked the sheriff.

Tate Skelton shook his head.

"You don't need a bed when you work for the Box X. Just a pocketful of matches to strike to see if you ketch the right horse to foller Buck Ripley on a forty-mile round-up circle."

It was one of the sheriff's stock jokes. He chuckled and helped himself to another drink.

Sheriff Carlos McCabe came from New Mexico. He had met Billy the Kid once at Fort Sumner. The Kid had eyes like this young stranger's. Just as cold and merciless. Billy the Kid grinned easy too. A buck-toothed, killer's grin.

Then the sheriff reached for the bottle the saloonman was shoving across the bar.

"I said a pint, Fatty."

"I made it a quart. Use what you don't drink fer to make the drunk come, to sober up on. Good huntin', Carlos."

"Make Buck Ripley pay fer the damages his outfit does, Fatty. I'll be thinkin' about you tonight when I set down to beat Circle Dot Kiley some checkers. The headache will be yours, not mine."

Then the peace officer looked straight at the young cowpuncher beside him.

"Take things easy, Tate Skelton. The Law here ain't what you'd call strict, but the boys make it a point to git along with it."

When the sheriff had gone Tate Skelton still stared at the swinging half doors as they stopped moving.

"He looks like a greaser. Down in Texas where I bin. . . ."

"They call 'em Mexicans," wheezed Fatty Jones. "Unless they crowd a fight. I come from down on the Pecos. Raised amongst Mexicans. Carlos McCabe's mother was New Mexican. Some kin to Elfego Baca. Elfego made a lone stand one time agin about fifty gringos from Texas that was goin' to invade and take over New Mexico. He give them tough Texicans a hell of a stand-off gun-battle and lived to tell it. Carlos takes after Elfego. He's a good man not to bother."

The whiskey Tate Skelton had gulped down was firing his blood. He could drink whiskey like a seasoned man, but like some men, he got ugly and quarrelsome and touchy when he had a few too many. Whiskey seemed to stir up a rankling bitterness inside him. His warped perspective became more twisted and he remembered the quirtings he'd taken from that rancher on Beef Creek, and insults and taunts he'd had to take because he was a kid and too undersized to fight back. He nursed the brooding notion that the hand of every man was against him. It never occurred to him that his own swaggering ways and his manner of talking made older men want to slap his ears down.

"If your sheriff is so damned tough," he grinned thinly, "why does he rabbit when a cow outfit comes to town?"

Fatty Jones scowled and rested both broken-knuckled hands on his bar. The

eyes under the shaggy brows lost their friendliness.

"Carlos McCabe knows every man in the Box X outfit, from wagon boss down to the cook. Now, mebbyso a few of them cowhands come from the Brown's Hole country. Good boys that's made a little mistake somewheres that they'd like to forget and mark down as a lesson learnt the hard 'way. Those boys mightn't feel free to come to town with a law officer here. So Carlos McCabe takes a bottle and pulls out for a game of checkers with Circle Dot Kiley over at the foot of Black Rock Butte. Them boys that might be on the dodge savvy and they shore appreciate the favor. They don't noways misuse the town. I don't reckon you git the idee, young feller. Carlos McCabe figgers his job is to mantain law and order at Rock Springs. He leaves the bounty huntin' to them glory-hungry, two-legged bloodhounds that like that kind of work. . . . Might be a good idee if you'd weight them drinks down with a bait of grub."

Fatty Jones reached out and took the bottle of whiskey and corked it and set it on the back bar. Then he picked up the two empty glasses and sloshed them in a tub of water under the bar.

Tate Skelton had quite a struggle keeping back that hot flow of abusive profanity that choked in his throat. He had no six-shooter. He had shoved his stolen carbine in a manger full of hay at the feed barn. He'd get it and swap it for a hand gun before he got into any kind of an argument with this big, hard-bitten saloonman or anyone else. But it was bitter to swallow, this being on the losing end of an argument. He hated that big man who was treating him like he was a bald faced button of a kid.

HE WANTED to ask about this man called Circle Dot Kiley. The horse he'd ridden away from his murdered man's barn wore the Circle Dot brand on the left shoulder. But he'd argued himself out of the chance to do any friendly and casual questioning. He'd

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talked when he should have been listening with both ears.

"That money," said the saloonman, "will buy you a good four-bit breakfast. Spend the rest on a bath and haircut and clean clothes. You look kinda lousy. Wash up, and mebbyso Buck Ripley will put you on. The Box X wagon boss is kinda choosy thataway."

The blood drained from the young drifter's tanned face. The muscles along the corners of his lean jaws knotted and he bared his teeth in an ugly grin that matched his hard gray eyes.

"Kinda pourin' it to me, ain't yuh, Fatty? You and that lawman both seen I don't pack a gun. I've heard the owl hoot, mister."

The big saloonman wiped his bar with a wet towel. His blue eyes were a little bloodshot but whiskey had not bleared their sharpness.

"You got the earmarks of a tough kid," he wheezed, "but you don't ride the Outlaw Trail. If you come up from Robbers' Roost or from Brown's Hole or the Hole in the Wall, I'd know it. Like when a man belongs to a lodge and he meets a feller wearin' the lodge button. He knows the grip and the pass word. Likewise, he knows what the score is."

"Now, if I was you I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Because you might be talkin' to a man that's actually heard the owl hoot along the Outlaw Trail. Them fellers don't cotton to fakes. Drop around later on when you git the wrinkles outa your belly and the stink cleaned off your hide."

The big man turned away. He limped as he walked down the bar and into his little office. His right foot wore a boot. The other was a wooden peg leg strapped to his knee stump.

Tate Skelton had come in with a swagger, the sacked saddle on his shoulder. When he turned away from the empty bar and went out through the swinging half doors, his hands felt like chunks of lead, and the sound of his boot heels sounded too loud in his own ears. He headed for the barn and the hidden saddle gun he was going to swap for a six-shooter.

A five dollar bill and the change for the other five, he left on the bar.

CHAPTER THREE

Tate Skelton's Private War

TATE SKELTON swapped the saddle carbine for a six-shooter and a handful of cartridges and got three dollars boot. He shoved the six-shooter into the waistband of his shabby Oregon wool cowpuncher pants and went back to the big saloon that was called the White Elephant. He shoved a dollar across the bar at Fatty Jones.

"That covers the drinks I bought. I'll take my outfit."

"It's where you left it. Git it." The saloonman rang up the silver dollar on his cash register. His voice was flat-toned, indifferent. He kept his broad back turned to the bar as he lined up the rows of polished glasses. But he was watching the young drifter in the bar mirror.

Tate Skelton stood there for a minute, scowling at the saloonkeeper's thick back. Fatty Jones was somewhere in his early sixties, but he was big and powerful and his hands were not slow moving. Young Tate changed his mind about trying for a shot at that broad back. He got his sacked saddle and swung it across his shoulder and walked out.

Fatty Jones watched him in the bar mirror. He had a big heart inside his barrel chest and an easy going, tolerant nature. Kids and old women liked him. Dogs trailed him along the street and he had a way with horses and drunks. He wondered why he couldn't warm up more to that tall, slim young drifter.

The boy's grin had taken him in all right, there at first, until he'd looked straight into those hard gray eyes. Fatty Jones was a good judge of men of all kinds. Even in the pen he'd found a streak of something decent in most of his fellow convicts. But he'd never met a man, even the hardest lifer in the pen, who owned as cold a pair of eyes as that eighteen year old young drifter.

"He's a bad 'un," he told himself, and poured some whiskey in a clean glass. "Born with them eyes." He shook his head and reached for a bottle. Only early in the morning when he woke up, or the last thing at night before he went to bed, did Fatty Jones drink alone. But he took

what he called a Dick Smith drink now. Through the big front window he watched the tall slim tow headed cowboy carry his sacked saddle into Dutch Mike's place across the street.

Dutch Mike catered to what was called the sheepherder trade. Even his best whiskey was bad and his Injun whiskey tasted like sheep-dip. Dutch Mike was a quart a day man and showed it. Anything went in his saloon that wore the sign Mike's Place. Sheriff Carlos McCabe let him stay open because it took the undesirable trade out of the White Elephant. It saved Fatty Jones the trouble of shooing out the barflies with his bung starter.

Fatty Jones told himself that the young drifter had better get some grub in his belly before that sheep-dip booze knocked him out cold, and Dutch Mike rolled him for whatever he'd loaned him on his hocked saddle. Then the big saloonman went back into his office with a week old newspaper to wait for the arrival in town of the Box X cowpunchers.

Tate Skelton borrowed fifteen dollars on his sacked outfit. He bought a round of drinks for the half dozen bleary eyed barflies. The second drink gagged him. He said something about getting his hair cut and got out of the place. Dutch Mike scowled after him when he went out. Then he cussed a couple of barflies back to work swamping out. The others slid out the back door. A tinhorn gambler resumed his game of solitaire.

The bad whiskey had sobered and sickened young Tate Skelton. He bought clean underwear and socks and a flannel shirt and a pair of Oregon pants. His Stetson hat was sweat marked and pulled out of shape and his shop made boots were getting a little rusty looking. But he had no twenty dollars for a new hat and he'd rather go barefooted than wear cheap cowhide store boots. He'd have the new boots he'd ordered from Hyer, in Olathe, Kansas, sent to him when he got located. He crossed over to the barber shop for a hot bath and a haircut. And no damned cracks from any barber about smearing cream on his face and lettin' the cat lick the fuzz off. Then he'd wrap himself around a bait of ham and eggs.

The barber looked like a good drinking man. Tate took his bundle of clean clothes into the bathroom at the rear of the shop and sent the barber into the White Elephant for a quart, to take the taste of Dutch Mike's sheep dip out of his mouth.

Tate Skelton was bathed, barbered, clean clothed, fed and half drunk by the time the Box X outfit finished loading and rode into town.

The younger cowpunchers arrived first, riding fresh horses and traveling at a high lope, some of them yipping and shooting off their guns in the air. Two or three of the wilder ones rode into the White Elephant for their first drinks. The others left their horses standing at the long hitchrack. Buck Ripley and the older hands stopped at the feed barn and stabled their horses and walked up the street.

Young Tate Skelton watched them from a smaller but far better saloon than Mike's Place. It was called the First and Last Chance and catered to the same cowpuncher trade Fatty Jones got. Tate had made up his mind, with a mental reservation or two, just in case, that he was keping out of the White Elephant.

He knew his way around a cow town like Rock Springs. Those Box X cowhands would get restless and start making the rounds of the several saloons. By the time they dragged their spurs into the First and Last Chance they would be well liquored and easy pickings in a crap game.

Tate Skelton carried his own pair of dice and knew how to roll them. Nobody ever suspected a grinning, tipsy, bald faced kid of having loaded dice. Young Tate Skelton had five dollars left out of the fifteen.

He had nearly a hundred dollars in his pocket by midnight when he swallowed his pride and went back to the White Elephant to tackle the Box X ramrod Buck Ripley for a job. He'd been told that Ripley did all his drinking at Fatty Jones's bar.

BUCK RIPLEY had an easy grin and a pair of puckered blue eyes. When he looked Tate over, the young drifter knew that Fatty Jones had

already told the Box X wagon boss about him and that his recommendation might be none too good.

"I'm full-handed for cowpunchers," the wagon boss told him. "But I seen that Injun boy I got wranglin' horses slippin' into Mike's Place. He'll be drunk in half an hour. Go down with his head under him before mornin'. And it'll be a week before he gits the sheep-dip likker outa his system. The nighthawk will fetch in the remuda the end of last guard time. You kin take it.

"We're camped five miles outa town on Little Bitter Crick. Tell the barn man to give you that Many Spots paint the Injun rode to town. Be sober enough to take out the cavvy and don't take no town bottle out to the cook. Git a count on your bell horses and let the cavvy spread out so's they won't starve fer feed. That Injun's bin close-herdin' 'em when he wasn't asleep in some cut coulee and lettin' 'em scatter like a sheepherder's brains. All the horses in your horse jingler string is paints. Ketch a fresh 'un when you need one. Spill ary horses and you're fired. That's the only job I got for a stranger. Take it or leave it. It's up to you."

There was a faint grin on the Box X ramrod's leathery face and a twinkle in his blue eyes. Tate wanted to wipe out that grin with a gun barrel. He wanted no damned low-down horse wrangling job. He was a cowhand and a good one.

But he was thinking of that girl back yonder at the ranch at the foot of Black Rock Butte and the way he had it figured out to meet her. His wide grin was forced and left his gray eyes cold.

"You've hired a horse wrangler," Tate told him.

Buck Ripley nodded. "Belly up to the bar. Your name's Tate Skelton, Fatty tells me."

"He told you right. I'll drink with you if you happen to drift down to the First and Last Chance."

His hard gray eyes looked across the bar at Fatty Jones. His voice was as dry as sand.

"When I left here I went down to the barn and stuck my finger down my throat and threw up the likker I drank with you. It tasted a lot better comin' up."

Tate Skelton turned and walked out. Those who had heard him, stared after him.

"Kinda prideful, ain't he?" grinned Buck Ripley.

"Somebody," said Fatty Jones a little sadly, "sometime, is goin' to shoot the belly off him."

Tate Skelton was still griped by anger when he crossed the street to Mike's Place. He elbowed the drunken Indian horse wrangler aside at the bar and shoved three five dollar bills at Dutch Mike.

"I come to git my saddle outa hock."

The paunchy saloonman wiped his hands on a bar apron and reached for the money. "Five dollars more," he said in his whiskey voice.

"For what, mister?"

Dutch Mike was too drunk to get a look at the young drifter's eyes. He winked at his barfly customers and grined slyly.

"For int'rest."

Tate's left arm reached out and he grabbed the thick wrist on the bar. He gave a heaving yank that pulled the saloon keeper's head and shoulders part way across the sloppy bar. The barrel of the six-shooter in young Tate's right hand swung up, then down in a short, clubbing blow. The gun-barrel crashed down on the shining bald skull with a sickening sound. Dutch Mike's bloodshot pale eyes were staring, glazed, as his paunchy bulk slid down behind the bar and lay there motionless.

Tate Skelton took the three five dollar bills off the wet bar and shoved them into his pocket. He got his saddle from behind the bar. He had to stretch his long legs to step over Dutch Mike's motionless bulk. The saloon man's eyes were rolled back in his head and only the bloodshot whites showed. Nobody spoke or moved when that tall, slim, hard eyed young cowboy came around the end of the bar with his sacked saddle over his shoulder and his six-shooter still in his hand.

"Drink hearty," Tate Skelton grinned flatly. "It's on the house."

Tate Skelton carried his sacked saddle on down the street to the First and Last Chance. He bought a quart of whiskey

and went on down the dark street to the feed and livery barn. He reckoned it was about three in the morning. He had just about enough time to get out to the round-up camp by the end of last guard time which was four o'clock.

The barn man was sleeping off a jag in the saddle room. Tate roped the only pinto in the feed corral. He was saddling when Sheriff Carlos McCabe rode up out of the darkness.

The sheriff swung from a horse that was marked with dried sweat. There was a Circle Dot brand on the gelding's left shoulder. Tate Skelton and the sheriff eyed one another in the yellow light of the barn lantern.

Young Tate's throat felt tight and his heart was thumping hard against his ribs. He wished he had another big slug of whiskey. He forced a grin and broke the awkward silence.

"Thought you'd rode outa town to play checkers with some feller named Circle Dot Kiley."

"Circle Dot Kiley," said Sheriff Carlos McCabe quietly, "won't play no more checkers. He was murdered by a damned coyote horse thief."

"Hard luck." Tate Skelton's voice was still gritty sounding.

"It'll be harder luck on the snake that murdered him. "Looks like you was aimin' to pull out, young feller."

"For the Box X round-up camp. I got a job wranglin' horses." He grinned and added, "I still ain't got a bed. Reckon I better take this lantern instead?"

Sheriff Carlos McCabe's faint grin was mirthless. "I see you managed for a six-shooter. Where's your saddle gun?"

"Don't own one."

"Circle Dot Kiley," said the sheriff in that same quiet voice, "was killed by a .30-30. I picked up the empty shell in the barn. . . . I'm kinda checkin' up as I go along. Don't try to quit the country."

"I told you I was goin' to jingle horses for the Box X outfit."

"Yeah, I heard you. And you told me this mornin' you'd come to Rock Springs durin' the night on that train of empty cattle cars. You shoulda figgered out a better lie. That string of cars has bin waitin' on the sidin' by the loadin' pens for a week. . . . Well, you might as well git on out to camp. If you didn't kill Kiley, you're in the clear. If you did murder him, you'll hang."

SHERIFF CARLOS McCABE slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard and leaned it against the side of the barn. Then he commenced unsaddling the leg-weary horse he'd borrowed at the Circle Dot ranch and ridden back to town. He did not even look up as Tate Skelton swung aboard the pinto horse and rode away.

Tate Skelton pulled the cork on his bottle when he had left the lights of Rock Springs behind him. That hard, cold lump was back again in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't cold fury now. It was fear—ice-cold fear. He needed whiskey to melt that hard lump inside his belly.

The hundred proof whiskey had no taste now. Damn that greaser sheriff! Letting a man lie himself into a trap. Never letting on that morning about that train of empty cattle cars. And all he had to do was wake up that drunken 'breed at the feed barn to find out that Tate Skelton had swapped him a .30-30 saddle gun for a six-shooter and a few cartridges and three bucks to boot. Kinda checkin' up as he went along, was he? Damn his greaser eyes!

And if that thieving Dutch Mike had a paper skull and had died there behind his bar, that was another nice hunk of tough luck.

Also, he'd made a hard hating enemy out of Fatty Jones. Another fool mistake. Well, he'd made a fine sour mess out of it. He'd worn out his welcome almighty quick at Rock Springs. . . .

A horse wrangler on an Injun paint pony. . . . Almost as bad as being bareback on a gruya mule! Tripped up again by a greenhorn kid mistake! He'd shore paddled his way up Mud Crick and throwed away the paddle. That Dutch Mike had looked plenty dead. That greaser sheriff would grab him on that and hold him in jail while he did some more of that checkin' up as he went along.

It was time some son that called himself Tate Skelton was drifting fast and far to where the climate fitted his new duds.

And to hell with that gal with the yellow braids; to hell with his plans. Change 'em and drift!

Change the beginnin' but not the end of those plans. The end was what counted. She'd be there five years from now, when Tate Skelton came back. If she wasn't there at the Circle Dot ranch at the foot of Black Rock Butte, he'd hunt her down. She was on his list. Along with that Kid Curry and the grinning Butch Cassidy. And that greaser Sheriff Carlos McCabe. And Fatty Jones.

Tate Skelton grinned and took another stiff drink. He'd have the whole Box X remuda to pick from, directly. He'd have to cut and run. That greaser sheriff would be organizing the Box X cowpunchers into a posse. But give the wolf a head start and he'd out-run the hound pack. He knows where he's headed for and he whips under and over and heads for his far skyline. A posse gets slowed down spreading out and they can't see for looking. He'd be hid out in the badlands of Brown's Hole before they picked up his sign.

The Hole in the Wall was hard to get into. But Brown's Hole offered a thousand hideouts for a lone wolf on the prowl. But he wasn't stopping for sleep until he'd reached Robbers' Roost in the southeast corner of Utah. Then he'd hole-up and sleep for a week before he drifted on into Arizona.

He'd cross the Colorado at Lee's Ferry, ride on to Tuba, then to Alma, New Mexico. He'd steal a horse when he had to, keep clear of the towns and ranches and live off the country. A little sack of salt and a skinning knife. . . .

He'd learned something from Fatty Jones. He'd learned it the hard way, like he'd had to learn everything he knew. He'd belong amongst those renegades a-plenty by the time he reached the Mexican Border. A tough kid could get along in Mexico. Those young Mexican señoritas had that palomino Circle Dot girl looking like a wrinkled old hag.

That's what her old man had worn. Comical in that nightshirt and his hat and bare shanks and spurs still on his boots. Bull's eye! And that goat-whiskered old miser back in Montana on Sand Crick. Beggin' and screamin'. No guts... And that thievin' Dutch Mike. Five dollars int'rest. He'd got his damned int'rest! That bald head of his had popped like a busted eggshell. Two, mebby three men he'd killed. And plenty more to add to the tally. If that nighthawk or the cook at the round-up camp tried to give him any lip. . . .

Tate Skelton was grinning wide when he rode up to the round-up camp on Little Bitter Creek south of Rock Springs. The remuda was in the rope corral. The nighthawk saddling his town horse.

"Where's the Injun?"

"I left him holdin' up Dutch Mike's bar." Tate Skelton looked the nighthawk over. He looked too tough to tackle. So he offered him a drink, and used a little wolf cunning.

"Which is Buck Ripley's top circle horse? He said somethin' about tackin' new shoes on him if I got around to it."

The nighthawk took a drink. Mellowed by the whiskey, he said he'd ketch Drifter out of the cavvy.

"Though why in hell he wants him shod again, I don't know. He shod him hisself last week. Mebby he just wants to sweat the booze outa your hide."

"Mebby."

Tate waited until the nighthawk roped a big brown gelding and put on a hackamore and tied the horse to the hind wheel of the bed wagon.

The nighthawk said not to let the cook so much as smell the cork or the old likker hound would head straight for town afoot for the rest of it. He rode off at a high trot. When he was out of sight Tate Skelton saddled the big brown gelding. Then he kicked down a couple of the forked corral props to let the horses free and rode over to the cook tent. He gave the grizzled round up cook what whiskey there was left in the bottle and rode away. Leaving behind him the one and only friend he'd made in Wyoming.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood-Money Man

FIVE years was not too long to wait when you had that sort of hate in your heart and brain that Tate Skelton fostered. He was like an artisan who

takes a length of crude strap steel and spends his hours and days and nights and years shaping it, tempering it, grinding it, whetting it, and finally honing it to razor edge.

There are men who flare into swift, white-hot anger and kill. Then the rage cools as suddenly as it flared, and there are the long years of a remaining lifetime to regret.

Other men are able to hold a bitter grudge for years, but the killing rage slowly dies and in time becomes no more than an unpleasant dislike.

And there are those few men who carry hate like a deadly weapon. They continually take it from the sheath, to whet, hone and polish it, keeping it untarnished and its edge sharp. To this rare type belonged the young killer who sometimes went by the name of Tate Skelton and sometimes by other names.

The years had changed him. His long, tall bones were covered with hard, lean, rawhide muscle. His nose was high bridged, and where the fists of Kid Curry had broken it there was an angular lump. A yellow, buckskin-colored mustache covered his upper lip and its ends drooped to cover the sharp, cruel corners of a thin mouth. There was nothing left now to identify him as the bald-faced tough young drifter who had given Sheriff Carlos McCabe and the Box X posse the slip.

That tall rawboned man with the drooping yellow mustache and the hard gray eyes used the name of Tate Skelton. Less than half a dozen men in the West knew him by that name and by sight.

He now wore a law badge pinned to his undershirt. But the name of Tate Skelton was hated and despised the length of the long Outlaw Trail that extended from the Mexican Border to the Canadian Line.

HONEST men spat out the name of Tate Skelton like poison. Men cursed when his name was heard among cowpunchers squatted beside round-up campfires or lazing in the bunkhouses.

Peace officers called Tate Skelton the most cold-blooded bounty-hunter they had ever heard tell of. Even undercover range detectives like the famous Charlie Siringo and Joe La Fors, who had matched and lost more than one hard man-hunting race with Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch, loathed and despised this range detective whom they had never to their knowledge met. Because Tate Skelton used the protection of his undershirt law badge as a legal license for cold blooded murder.

The only men who knew him by sight as Tate Skelton were certain men who had his bounty money ready in cash when he showed up to collect the price on the scalp of a dead outlaw.

Cowtowns along the cattle trails out of Texas knew a tall rawboned cowpuncher with a drooping yellow mustache and hard gray eyes. They knew him by various names, but knew nothing about him except that he was always well heeled and spent his money quietly for drinks or to buy chips in a high-stake poker game.

He was a silent sort of a man who avoided quarrels and arguments and stayed away from trouble. He held his whiskey well and when he gambled he

seldom lost. Saloonkeepers and bartenders knew him as a good spender who never got drunk. Tinhorn gamblers never tried to cheat after that first attempt when the quiet spoken man with the hard gray eyes got the deal and duplicated their card sharping trick more cunningly than they had done it. And backed up his exposure of their cheating with silence and a long, hard look from that pair of steel colored eyes.

He never stayed long in any town. He rode top horses and his cowpuncher pants and flannel shirts were tailored to fit. He wore the finest hat made by John B. Stetson and his alligator shop made boots fit like a pair of gloves. Like the buckskin gloves that he wore when he was riding. And while he thus built up a mysterious reputation few men ever suspected that he was the notorious and bitterly hated bounty hunter, Tate Skelton. He must have heard that name cursed countless times in town and at cattle ranches.

The Outlaw Trail knew a man with sweat-matted yellow hair and a heavy growth of yellow beard that covered most of his face. That man wore saddle warped overalls and a faded old flannel shirt and a sweat-stained hat pulled out of shape. He was mighty handy with saddle rope and running iron, six-shooter or saddle gun. This bearded outlaw with the hard gray eyes and his notched, ivory-handled six-shooter, they knew as a horse thief and cattle rustler. He never went farther north along the Outlaw Trail than Robbers' Roost in the southeast corner of Utah.

They called him Rawhide and he claimed he had no real name. He threw in with horse thief and cattle rustling gangs, he bragged when drunk, just for the hell of it. Robbing banks was his game and he worked lone handed, always. Some tough outlaws had sworn to kill him, but this Rawhide renegade out-wolfed them. He never pulled a gun unless he was primed and ready to kill. He didn't miss.

The outlaw called Rawhide would file another notch on his ivory handled six-shooter. Then he would bury his dead. He marked the grave of every outlaw he killed with a granite slab or a boulder. With the dead outlaw's name chiseled deep in the granite. And underneath it was also chiseled "Killed by Rawhide."

After one of these killings, the outlaw Rawhide would invariably ride away and would be gone a month or two. And it would be about that time when the cow towns along the cattle trails would again see the carefully dressed cowpuncher-gambler with the drooping yellow mustache. He would have a heavy bankroll and he would call himself Smith or Jones or Brown or Green or Black.

"I change names for good luck," he told saloonkeepers and gamblers when he showed up under a new alias.

Only the man's eyes remained unchanged to link the tawny mustached-cowpuncher gambler with the heavy bearded outlaw Rawhide. And only those secret few men who paid blood-money bounty on dead outlaws connected the bearded Rawhide with the yellow mustached man. The bounty payoff was always made in some big city, by secret appointment.

THE payoff was made by some special agent representing the railroads or banks or insurance companies who had put the big bounty price on the dead outlaw's tough hide. They alone knew the man for what he really was. A cold-blooded, merciless, wolfishly cunning killer who loved his work. They feared him and despised him for what he was. But he was exterminating the train robbers and bank robbers.

Tate Skelton was clever enough to read their feelings towards him. Instead of being insulted, he gloried in his cold blooded reputation. He even taunted them about it.

"Killin' is my trade. I've trained all my life, since I kin remember, how to git the job done. Let 'em know who I am along the Outlaw Trail and they'd kill me on sight. It takes wolf guts and wolf brains, misters, to be Tate Skelton. If a man aimed to kill you, would you let him have an even break if he was a faster gun slinger? You're damned right you wouldn't!

"I know every man I kill before I pull my gun. If whiskey slows him down, I wait till he's likkered. He goes for his

gun and I beat him to it. When I know the other man is mebby an edge faster than me, I bush up somewheres along the trail and shoot him where his suspenders cross.

"I don't bother killin' any man unless there's a high bounty on his scalp. Unless I have to kill some man that gits in my way. I hate to kill for nothin'. Would an artist that gits a thousand, two thousand dollars for a picture waste his time paintin' a picture and givin' it away?

"And gittin' down to cases, the men that lay this bounty money on the line are just as guilty of murder as Tate Skelton is when he does the gun work and collects for the job. The railroads and banks and insurance companies and what you call the Law that puts up the bounty money, they're worse than Tate Skelton. Why? Because they ain't takin' one damned little chance. It ain't their life that's being gambled. Hell, I kin take a corncob and a lightnin' bug and run the pack of you lily fingered payoff men till you drop dead from fright!"

His five years were up now and he was ready to go back to Rock Springs and the Hole in the Wall. He had kept in touch. Sheriff Carlos McCabe was still at Rock Springs. Fatty Jones still ran his White Elephant Saloon. Dutch Mike, it seemed, had what Tate had called an eggshell skull and had died from that gun rap across his bald head.

Buck Ripley had been killed by a bronc. The miser rancher on Sand Creek, up in Montana, had been found dead there in his cabin, the soles of his feet burnt black.

Kid Curry had killed a man named Jim Winters near Landusky, Montana, and was holed up at the Hole in the Wall waiting for Butch Cassidy and the scattered Wild Bunch to meet him there for a big train hold-up they had figured out.

Circle Dot Kiley's daughter Kit ran her little cow oufit at the foot of Black Rock Butte, and it might be that Tate Skelton would run into Kid Curry there, because the notorious Kid Curry was spending all of his spare time there at the Circle Dot ranch. Punching cows and running the ranch for the girl. Some said he was secretly married to Kit Kiley.

At his last and final meeting with the two payoff agents in Denver, Tate Skelton played the hole card he'd kept buried for five long years.

"The first man I ever killed with a gun," he told them, "was a rancher in Wyoming. He was usin' the name of Kiley. His brand was Circle Dot. So they called him Circle Dot Kiley.

"I wrote you to have a thousand dollars ready. Here's a copy of the Rock Springs, Wyoming paper that tells about the killin' of Circle Dot Kiley by a tough young driftin' cowboy named Tate Skelton. The only part of the description there in the five-year-old newspaper is my eyes. Look at 'em!"

"We've looked at your eyes before, Skelton," said one of the payoff agents when both of them had read Kit Kiley's account of her father's cold-blooded murder.

"We're willin' to take your word for it," said the other man grimly.

"Kiley's Circle Dot ranch," said Tate Skelton, "was a stoppin' place and way station for Butch Cassidy and Kid Curry and the Wild Bunch. Kiley's outlaw name was the Canadian Kid. There was a thousand dollar price on his head when he quit the Outlaw Trail and changed his name to Kiley and he married and settled down to ranchin'. Here is letters and papers I taken off a dead outlaw that proves what I say. I'm swappin' this proof for that thousand dollars bounty."

THE proof was there. Proof that the murdered Kiley had once been the Canadian Kid. Kiley had made a clean break from his outlaw life, according to Sheriff Carlos McCabe. At the time he was murdered, Sheriff Carlos McCabe had been quietly negotiating with proper authorities to have the old indictments against the Canadian Kid scratched off the law books. Kiley did not own a gun.

What the quick triggered Tate Skelton had mistaken for a six-shooter in the rancher's hand had been a nickel plated metal case with some veterinary instruments in it. There'd been a sick mare in a box stall and he'd heard a commotion in the barn and thought it was the mare. He had pulled on his hat and boots

and had not stopped to even pull on his pants in his haste to get there to doctor the sick mare.

Tate Skelton had shot down in cold blood a man who had not had a gun in his hand for fifteen years. A man whose cabin and barn doors were never locked to any man. Sheriff Carlos McCabe had made the statement that he would not risk his life trying to save the young killer from a cottonwood limb hanging.

"The indictments against the Canadian Kid," Tate Skelton told the two payoff agents, "still was on record when Kiley was killed. There was still a standin' reward for the capture dead or alive of the Canadian Kid. He was usin' the name of Kiley when I killed him. I'll collect my thousand dollar bounty on the dead carcass of the Canadian Kid. Pay me."

He shoved the money into the tailored cowpuncher pants. "The outlaw called Rawhide," he told them flatly, "is dead. I'll be wearin' these clothes and travelin' under the name of Tate Skelton when I kill an outlaw whose name is Harvey Logan but is better known as Kid Curry. Mebbyso I'll turn in my undershirt law badge when I kill Kid Curry and collect somewheres around twenty thousand dollars on his high priced hide. But mebbyso I won't.

"This is the kind of a game that gits a strong holt on a man. Makes other games like high stake poker shore tame. So most mebby I'll keep on till I play my string out. Adios, gents. Tally up the bounty money on Kid Curry's scalp and have it in cash. So-long."

CHAPTER FIVE

Death In Boots

PATTY JONES claimed that he could always predict when the first snow and big freeze of approaching Wyoming winter was about due. He had a bad case of chilblains, and the sole of his left foot would itch fit to drive a man locoed, he claimed. His left leg had been amputated years ago at the knee joint. His lower left leg was his peg leg. But he claimed it was chilblains in his lost foot that bothered him and he liked to tell it that way.

He'd lost that leg back in his wild outlaw days. A bullet from the gun of a posse rider had torn the muscle and shattered his shin bone. He'd tied a twisted tourniquet above the wound to keep from bleeding to death and ridden on.

That night the weather changed and the first big freeze set in. The wounded leg froze stiff and blood poison set in. After the posse captured him, the leg was amputated by a cow town doctor. He'd been sent to prison for life. He said that gave him plenty of spare time to whittle out this hardwood peg leg he still wore after he'd been pardoned out of the pen.

But Fatty Jones held to the old belief that the doctor hadn't buried that leg. And that was why, he claimed, that he got chilblains every year just before the big freeze.

Standing behind his bar at the White Elephant, he was drinking whiskey with his swamper and the train crew that had finished shunting a long string of empty cattle cars onto the siding at the stockyards. The Box X outfit was shipping in the morning. The outfit was camped a few miles from town on Little Bitter Creek, holding their beef herd.

The cowtown of Rock Springs was quiet and this was the hour after supper when saloon trade was dull. The train crew had just finished their shift and were having a few drinks before a delayed supper. Get Fatty Jones started on the subject of the chilblains in his lost foot and the free drinks flowed. The train crew, conductor and brakeman, engineer and fireman, leaned against the bar and listened. While a gambler dealt poker hands at a round green cloth covered table and lent a half attentive ear as he riffled and shuffled and dealt his cards.

Tacked to the back bar was a five year old reward dodger that offered a thousand dollars for the capture, dead or alive, of a drifting young cowpuncher killer named Tate Skelton. It was the one and only reward dodger that had ever been posted inside Fatty Jones' White Elephant Saloon. And on the back bar where rows of glasses and bottles had been moved to make room for it, was a five gallon keg with a hole cut in its hardwood top.

Into this keg, during the past five years,

had been dropped coins and green and yellow currency—donations from men who had known and liked the murdered Circle Dot Kiley. Thus, in addition to the original thousand dollars shoved into the keg by the Wild Bunch, there was as much or more than that amount donated by Sheriff Carlos McCabe and Fatty Jones and the late Buck Ripley and the Box X cowhands.

Whenever there was a cow-outfit in town on a spending spree, Fatty Jones would wait until the drinks were flowing free, then he'd bring up the memory of the murder of Circle Dot Kiley, and more money would go into the keg. Not even the saloonkeeper had any notion how much money the keg actually held.

Fatty Jones had exhausted the subject of chilblains and made his customary gesture before paying cash customers left the saloon. Jerking a thumb towards the keg on the back bar and the old reward dodger.

"Tate Skelton," he explained in his whiskey voice, "still prowls the cow country, though he gives Rock Springs a wide margin when he drifts. He's a damned bounty hunter with a law badge pinned to his undershirt and he murders his men for what their dead carcasses will fetch him on the law market. . . .

"We never pressed this murder charge ag'in' Tate Skelton. Circle Dot Kiley left friends behind that'll take care of that murderin', tow-headed whelp when they cut his sign. And like as not whoever does kill Tate Skelton and rakes in this here likker keg full of money, will turn it over to Circle Dot Kiley's daughter Kit. She seen her father murdered and her description of the killer that rode off in the moonlight fitted that young drifter like a shop made boot.

"Kit Kiley's as game as she is purty. She stuck it out. Runs her own outfit. Though the boys that gathers her cattle and donates her all the mav'ricks they find and put in her Circle Dot iron won't take nothin' but their grub fer wages. . . . Before you go to supper, if you care to, donate the change you got comin' for drinks. . . ."

The train crew nodded. Fatty Jones dropped a few silver dollars and loose change into the keg. The gambler at the empty table said he'd donate the little percentage the house collected from every jackpot tomorrow night. That he'd traveled all over the cow country and had heard enough about this Tate Skelton to make him more than willing to ante his dealer's percentage to the keg.

He had just made the statement when the tall man in tailored cowpuncher clothes walked in through the swinging half-doors of the White Elephant. His drooping yellow mustache partly hid the faint, thin grin of his cruel mouth. The slanted low pulled brim of his Five X Stetson hat shaded his eyes that were the color of unpolished steel.

The gambler recognized him as the mysterious drifting cowpuncher-gambler who went under many aliases. Their trails had crossed a time or two in the southwest.

He could have been standing out yonder on the sidewalk in the dark for some time, looking in over the swinging doors, listening to the talk in the saloon.

The man with the drooping yellow mustache nodded briefly to the gambler. Then he walked over to the bar, a sort of swagger to his long-legged gait.

The train crew looked at him with casual curiosity. Fatty Jones looked straight at him without remembering where or when he had ever seen the man before. But the stranger's expensive clothes prompted the saloonkeeper to reach for a bottle of his best bonded whiskey. He set it on the bar with a clean glass and filled another glass with a cold water chaser.

The tall stranger avoided the saloonkeeper's eyes. He stared hard at the five year old reward dodger and the five gallon whiskey keg on the back bar. The grin behind the drooping yellow mustache twisted.

"How much," he said in a flat toned voice and without looking at the saloon man, "do you reckon is in that reward keg?"

"Well, sir," grinned Fatty Jones, looking at the keg, then rocking it slowly with his two big hands, his back to the new customer, "that's a question I got to answer every day and a few times every night. I'd say there's anyhow five thousand dollars in that keg. Keg and all goes

to the man that captures or kills the lowest-down human that ever drifted into Rock Springs and got away. Tate Skelton."

The tall, yellow mustached range dude took a thick roll of money from his pocket. He held it in his left hand. "I've got ten thousand dollars in this roll. I'm bettin' all of it against what's in your keg that there ain't a man around this Rock Springs country that's fast enough or tough enough to shoot it out with Tate Skelton!"

FATTY JONES let go the keg and swung around on his peg leg. It had taken a few seconds for that queer sounding challenge to sink in. It wasn't the brand of talk he was used to hearing in his saloon.

As Fatty Jones swung slowly around, he stared straight into the hard, cold gray eyes of the tall stranger with the yellow mustache. Into the pair of eyes he had seen before and would never forget. The eyes of Tate Skelton.

For several tense seconds the saloon man stared across the bar into that pair of killer's eyes. The color drained from Fatty Jones's face. Then he reached for the old wooden handled six-shooter he kept under the bar.

Tate Skelton let Fatty Jones get his hand on the gun. Then his six-shooter with its notched ivory handle slid from its carved leather holster. It spat a short streak of fire as it came above the level of the bar. The heavy .45 slug made a black hole in the big saloonman's forehead and tore out the back of his gray thatched skull.

Fatty Jones's sagging bulk shifted its entire weight on his peg leg, which snapped, and the saloonkeeper went down with a dull crashing thud.

The white-handled gun covered the lone gambler and the train crew as Tate Skelton backed slowly away from the bar. He had shoved his roll of money back in his pocket and had the corked bottle of bonded whiskey in his left buckskin-gloved hand.

His twisting grin lifted one side of his drooping yellow mustache and his voice was flat toned. "Take it easy and you won't git hurt. Fatty Jones kin scratch his itchin' chilblanes in Hell. . . . When Sheriff Carlos McCabe shows up, tell him that if he feels lucky he'll find Tate Skelton at the Circle Dot ranch, where he's gone to ketch up on some girlin' with Kit Kiley. Tell the sheriff that when he shows up, tinhorn. I'll be back for that keg of money when I git my chores done at the Circle Dot ranch. Adios and so-long!"

Tate Skelton forked the saddled horse he'd left standing at the hitchrack and rode down the main street of Rock Springs and into the night.

THE rocks and brush patches along the wagon trail from Rock Springs to the Circle Dot ranch made black chunks of shadow in the moonlight night. The wagon trail crossed a coulee where the brush and boulders were thick.

Tate Skelton left his saddled horse hidden a ways from the road and in behind the brush and rocks and out of sight. Then he came back with his saddle gun and sat in behind a nest of big granite boulders. He rolled and lit a cigarette and took a drink from his bottle.

While he waited for Sheriff Carlos McCabe to ride along, he took a small three cornered file from his chaps pocket and painstakingly filed a new notch on the ivory handle of his six-shooter.

Killing Fatty Jones had been kid's play. The rheumatic old outlaw saloonkeeper was slow and clumsy, and the shock of seeing Tate Skelton face to face across his bar had unnerved the old whiskey soaked cuss. Him and his damned chilblains in a foot he hadn't worn in twenty years! His reward dodger and his damned keg of money!

"I'll ride back for that keg of money," he promised himself. "Rock Springs will donate more dinero for the sake of Fatty Jones. And when they find out I've killed Sheriff Carlos McCabe, they'll stuff the keg choke-full."

Killing the fighting sheriff was giving Tate Skelton no worry. Carlos McCabe would be too prideful to fetch along a posse. He'd come riding alone along the wagon trail, and he'd be in a hell of a hurry to reach the Circle Dot ranch at the

foot of Black Rock Butte before Tate Skelton got his hands on Kit Kiley. Sheriff Carlos McCabe would be in a reckless, careless hurry.

Tate Skelton had no notion of giving this tough law officer any part of a fighting chance. The cold-eyed bushwhacker had set and sprung more than a few gun-traps like this one. He'd never yet made a mistake. His gun hand was steady. He'd use his six-shooter. The saddle carbine was only in case the sheriff had fetched along some kind of a pool-room posse. Posse riders were about as harmful in Tate Skelton's calculations as a band of sheep.

round hole. It smashed the sheriff's spine below his shoulders and ripped through the fighting heart of the man.

That shot in the back had been cowardly but merciful. Sheriff Carlos McCabe toppled out of his saddle and struck the rocks on the side of the trail. He was dead before he hit the ground.

TATE SKELTON grinned and ejected the smoking shell from his notched gun. He shoved a fresh cartridge into the chamber of the cylinder and slid the gun back into its fancy carved

Only a man who's actually worked the rough, up-and-down Arizona cow-country, where soaked and frozen punchers top brush for wild-eyed long-horns, can take you to the Cross-Up range, where Rough Canyon Cuttle is gunning for the Old Man's round-up crew! Walt Coburn does it, in another colorful long story, in the May issue of DIME WESTERN! Read it March 31st!

He heard the sound of a horse's shod hoofs on the rocky wagon trail. Then the coming rider was skylighted as he topped the edge of the coulee and came down the slant at a long trot. Sheriff Carlos McCabe was riding alone.

Tate Skelton took a quick drink and corked the bottle. Then he stood flattened against the black shadow of the big granite boulder and thumbed back the hammer of his six-shooter. His eyes glittered liked steel slits and his white toothed grin was wolfish.

Sheriff Carlos McCabe rode past him, so close that Tate could have knocked his low pulled hat off with a rock. He could see the set, grim look on the sheriff's leathery face.

In the moonlight Tate could see where the peace officer's wide elastic suspenders crossed in the middle of his back below his shoulders. The wide white elastic bands were held together where they crossed by a heart shaped piece of leather sewn to the webbing strips. That bit leather made a nice target for a crack shot like Tate Skelton.

The six-shooter in his hand spewed flame and the .45 slug hit the heart shaped leather in its middle. It made a neat

holster. Then he pulled the cork and took a long drink.

He unsaddled the sheriff's horse, pulled off the bridle and turned the horse loose. It headed back along the road to town. His saddle gun in the crook of his left arm, he stared down at the dead man for about a minute. His mouth twisted a little, his gray eyes glittering.

Before he rode on, he filed a deep notch on his ivory-handled six-shooter.

Tate Skelton had one more man to kill. That man was the outlaw Kid Curry. According to the news carried down the Outlaw Trail by the rustling of the leaves, the notorious Kid Curry was roundsiding at the Hole in the Wall. He had killed the rancher Jim Winters, who had killed the Kid's brother Johnny in a gun fight up in Montana.

The Law had driven Kid Curry back into the safe refuge of the Hole in the Wall. With the range detective Charlie Siringo and Joe La Fors on the prowl and every sheriff and deputy in Montana and Wyoming on the watch for him, he'd stay at the Hole in the Wall until the chase died down.

The Hole in the Wall was several days hard riding north of the Circle Dot ranch

at the foot of Black Rock Butte. Not even the bold Kid Curry would be likely to chance getting caught there at the Circle Dot ranch by the law hounds. And that should leave the golden-haired Kit Kiley all alone at her ranch.

Moonlight, Tate Skelton told himself as he took another drink, was made for bushwhacking. But it was said to be the real McCoy for lovers, and Tate Skelton fancied himself a top-hand ladies' man. The way the cards were falling into his hand, it looked like this moonlight night was his night to claim Kit Kiley.

No Rock Springs posse would be taking out after him until the sheriff's horse showed up at the feed barn. That was giving him a few hours start, which was all he needed, all he asked for. When he left the Circle Dot ranch he'd be headed for the Hole in the Wall and riding like hell. He pushed his horse hard now to get there. He was impatient for a closer look at that girl he'd waited five long years to see again.

When he sighted the log buildings and pole corrals of the Circle Dot ranch, he pulled the cork on his bottle, then scowled a little, for the bottle was two thirds empty. He'd drunk more than he calculated. He'd killed two enemies tonight and the blood lust had made him drunker than the whiskey. If only he could shoot Kid Curry now, then claim Kit Kiley, this would be the biggest night of his life. . . .

He rode boldly up to the ranch where, on another moonlight night five years ago, he had shot his first man. There was nobody here to challenge his coming. Behind drawn blinds a light burned inside the log house. Though the hour was late, some time past midnight.

The door of the log house opened as he rode up and reined his horse to a halt. And framed in the lighted doorway stood Kit Kiley.

The long thick braids were now a loosely piled tawny crown that shone like spun gold in the lamplight. Instead of a nightgown she wore a red and white checked gingham dress. But this was the same girl who, five years ago, had seen him ride away from the barn yonder, leaving behind the murdered body of her father.

Tate Skelton lifted his hat and bowed a little in his saddle.

"Who are you?" The girl's voice sounded brittle.

"Tate Skelton," he said bluntly, and swung down.

CHAPTER SIX

Bushwhacker Medicine

KIT KILEY did not scream or slam the door and bolt it. She stood there, tall and slim and straight, the lamplight behind her, the doorway making a frame for her, like a life-sized portrait. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black in the shadow. But there was nothing like fear in those eyes or in her voice and her tanned cheeks had lost little of their healthy color.

"I've always known," she said quietly, when he stood facing her, almost within the reach of his long arms, "that you'd come back. When I saw you ride up, I knew who it was. I'd seen you ride a horse before. I'd never forget the way you sat a saddle or the way you handle a horse.

"You use your spurs too much and you use a spade bit. You're as much afraid of a horse as you are of a brave man. So you cut a horse's mouth with a spade bit and tear his hide with spurs when you've got his head jerked up so he can't pitch. That horse that's packed you here is leg-weary and there isn't a dry hair on him. He's played out."

"I changed horses here before," he grinned faintly.

"I remember. But you're out of luck this time. The barn's empty. There's a heavy work team in the horse pasture. And only two saddle horses. Both of 'em are one-man horses. Either of 'em will throw you before you ever get your right stirrup. You've set yourself afoot, mister."

The night was soft and warm but Tate Skelton felt a cold, clammy chill along his spine. That girl was not lying. Set afoot here at the Circle Dot ranch, a few hours hard ride from Rock Springs, was not to his liking, nor had he figured it into his cold calculations.

He'd killed Fatty Jones, and the mur-

dered sheriff's horse would be showing up at the feed barn in town. The Box X outfit was camped a few miles below town on Little Bitter Creek.

By daybreak there would be half a hundred heavily armed men in the saddle, riding hard for the Circle Dot ranch. Killing those two men he'd hated so long, getting that revenge had made him drunker than the quart of whiskey, and the insane craving to see this girl again had made him crowd his horse too hard. The fear that gripped him now was the fear of a trapped wolf.

Kit Kiley stepped back and closed the door in his face. He heard a heavy bolt sliding into its groove.

For perhaps half a minute Tate Skelton stood there on long, wide-spread legs. Something like panic was clamping his heart and there was a cold and empty feeling inside his belly. A clammy sweat beaded his forehead and he cursed himself and his luck in a low, rasping whisper. He wiped the palms of his hands and slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard. Then he walked to the nearest window and smashed away the windowpane with the barrel of his saddle gun. He reached in through the shattered opening and yanked away the drawn shade.

There was a lighted lamp on a large round table that was partly covered by stacks of books and newspapers. There were some old easy chairs and bearskin rugs on the floor. Framed pictures on the log walls.

Kit Kiley stood beside the large table. There was a faint, contemptuous smile on her tanned face. Her dark eyes mocked him as he came in through the broken window. He shoved one long leg through and then bent and twisted to get his head and shoulders inside and then he pulled his other leg through and stood erect, slapping jagged bits of broken glass from his gray flannel shirt. She was looking him over from head to foot with a cold contemptuous curiosity. She did not flinch when she looked into his hard cold steel gray eyes.

"So you're the notorious bounty-hunter, Tate Skelton!" Her voice matched the contempt in her eyes. "All tricked out like a range dude. It's easy to believe how you tortured a defenseless eighty year old man and left him, hogtied and suffering, to die. You're the thing that shoots brave men in the back. This is another fine sample of your courage. I live here alone, so you break into my house with a gun in your hand. You killed my father. Murdered a man who hadn't had a gun in his hand for fifteen years. I don't own a gun, either. You probably knew that or you'd never have had the nerve to come here. Did you come from Rock Springs?"

"I just come from Rock Springs." Tate Skelton's voice was dry throated, harsh. "I killed Fatty Jones. When Sheriff Carlos McCabe come hot trailin' me, I killed him. It'll be daybreak, anyhow, before anybody else takes my trail. That gives me four-five hours to drag that high chinned pride outa you. I've cleared my trail here with a gun. I've waited five years for tonight."

TATE SKELTON leaned his saddle gun against the wall near the window and walked slowly towards the table. His skin was yellowish and his teeth were bared in a wolfish grin. When he moved around the big table the girl moved also, keeping the table between them. Her face had paled a little but there was no fear in her eyes.

He quickened his long legged strides. She kept out of his way. One of her hands slid in under the Indian tanned buckskin table cover. It came into sight again holding a butcher knife.

"Stand where you are, mister. Don't come any closer. I'd rather kill myself now than afterwards. Or is that too hard for a lady-killer like Tate Skelton to believe?"

Tate Skelton had halted in his tracks. His eyes were bloodshot, glassy looking. His heavy breath reeked of whiskey.

"Tate Skelton," sounded a flat toned voice from the broken window. "The bounty hunter!"

Tate Skelton's back was towards the open window. He whirled around, clawing for his six-shooter.

Kit Kiley threw herself flat on the floor. Framed in the window was the head and shoulders of Kid Curry. The six-shooter in the outlaw's hand roared.

Tate Skelton's six-shooter was sliding from its fancy carved holster when the heavy .45 slug struck his gun-hand, smashing the notched ivory handle. Some of the ivory splinters were driven into the torn, bloody flesh of the man-hunter's gun hand.

Kid Curry came in through the window with a swift leap. He rushed Tate Skelton off his feet, knocked him staggering backwards, then clubbed him down with a swinging gun-barrel. When the killer rolled over and tried to scramble back onto his feet the quick-moving outlaw kicked him savagely in the belly, doubling him up, then booted him hard in the face. Blood spurted and the killer covered his smashed face with his arms.

"Fetch some kind of a hoggin' string, Kit," said Kid Curry flatly. "The Box X boys will be along directly. I'm turnin' this thing over to them till I fetch the Wild Bunch from Brown's Hole.

He picked up the killer's gun, holding it by its barrel. There was nothing left of the notched ivory handle.

"Too bad," he shook his head, "I kinda wanted to keep that notched handled gun for to remember you by, mister."

Kid Curry tied Tate Skelton's good hand to his tightly tied legs. Then he tightened a tourniquet around the wrist above the bullet-smashed hand.

"Shot away part of your thumb and your trigger finger. But you won't have to worry none about learnin' how to shoot left handed. The Box X outfit is makin' other arrangements."

Tate Skelton lay there on the floor. The first shock was wearing off now and the pain was starting. He was gritting his teeth and the color of his face was a yellowish gray. Pain and fright seared his hard gray eyes.

"I'd rode to town," Kid Curry rolled a cigarette and ran the tip of his tongue along the brown paper, "to git you a present, Kit. They told me Fatty Jones had bin killed and the sheriff had gone after his killer. The wagon boss from the Box X was in town to see about his cattle cars. I sent him back to camp to fetch his men. Then hightailed it for here. I found Carlos McCabe dead along the trail—shot in the back. I come right along. Sighted the light in the house and no window blind on it. So I left my horse in the brush and slipped around to the window and ketched this thing playin' tag with you." He kicked Tate Skelton in the pants and grinned.

"He's your weddin' present from the Wild Bunch, Kit. Buck kin pick up the keg of money for you at the White Elephant. And you kin buy a weddin' veil with this." He handed her the roll of money he'd taken from the prisoner's pocket.

Kit held the money awkwardly. Her voice sounded husky. "There's coffee on the kitchen stove. And a jug of Fatty's best whiskey on the shelf. I think I could use something myself. I'm having a slight attack of weak knees. It's the sissy in me. You saw Buck in town?"

"Young Buck Ripley hisself. That ramrod job his daddy left him ain't givin' him Stetson fever neither. His hat still fits. He was rarin' to come with me. He's kinda mule headed. You might wear them levi overalls on the round-ups, Kit, but when you two git hitched, it won't be Missus Buck Ripley that wears the pants at the Circle Dot ranch. Though you did look ornery enough when you was makin' that butcher knife stand-off."

Kid Curry spiked two cups of black coffee with whiskey. Tate Skelton groaned through gritting teeth. The outlaw walked over to where he lay and kicked him hard in the belly.

"Lay quiet, snake, and mebbyso we'll forget you're here. . . . When you drink this, Kit, you better saddle a horse and take a little ride."

"If you're hanging this slobbering thing that murdered my father," said Kit Kiley quietly, "I wouldn't miss it for all the cattle in the Circle Dot iron."

THE sky was as gray as gun lead and there was a chill wind that had a whetted edge to it. In the east, the clouds were shot by thin crimson streaks where the cloud bank hid the rising sun. Fatty Jones had predicted the truth about a change in the weather. The water in the creeks would be freezing and there was a snow coming.

Saddled horses stood, rumps to the raw

wind. The Box X cowhands stood around with half smoked cigarettes in their cupped gloved hands. They had built a little fire and they stood around it, sipping strong black coffee that was well spiked with whiskey.

"It'll be stormin' by the time we get them steers penned and start loadin'," said one cowpuncher. "Even if we pulled out now fer town, it'd be past noon by the time we got the herd penned."

"We won't ship today. Tomorrow mornin', mebby. Unless it storms too hard. In which case we'll hold the herd on good feed and wait till the storm breaks up. We'll ride around 'em tonight and sing to 'em as they lay on the bed ground."

"And it ketched me," shivered a younger cowboy, "with my hen-skin underwear on."

"I don't never shed my winter woolen drawers," grinned a grizzled old timer. "Red flannel, summer *and* winter."

"Come the first snow," joshed another cowhand. "He buys hisse'f a new set and slips it on over the summer outfit. Never change is right."

They kept watching the trail from the north. Now and then one of them would walk over to the log house and go in. Or a cowpuncher would come out of the house and join the others around the campfire.

"How's he standin' the gaff?" somebody would ask.

"Buck's feedin' him some likker. He's quit slobberin'. Them damned eyes of his gives a man the shivers. I wish Kit would pull out. It won't be a purty thing to watch if he weakens."

"Tate Skelton won't weaken."

"Five will git you ten if he don't, cowhand."

"Wish they'd show up."

"You got your wish, feller. Looky yonder."

Half a dozen riders had topped the skyline and were coming. Coming at a long trot.

The cowpunchers around the campfire finished their spiked coffee and hitched up their chaps and cartridge belts.

"That's Butch Cassidy in the lead with Kid Curry. The long geared feller is

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Ben Kilpatrick. The Sundance Kid with Ben. The other two is Bill Carver and Camilla Hanks. They're goin' to give Tate Skelton a treat. They're aimin' to give that bounty-hunter his first and last look at about sixty thousand dollars worth of outlaw meat runnin' free and loose and on the hoof. Yonder, gents, comes a-ridin' the Wild Bunch!"

The Wild Bunch rode up without any kind of fuss or bother. They might have been six common cowhands from a round up camp. They nodded to the Box X cowpunchers. Then Kid Curry led them into the log house. The door closed.

THE door opened again in about five minutes, and Tate Skelton walked out between Kid Curry and Butch Cassidy. The killer's arms were tied behind his back and his long legs were none too steady.

His eyes were bloodshot. Their dark steel color was glazed. His thin-lipped mouth kept twitching and twisting.

The other members of the Wild Bunch came out. The Sundance Kid, whose real name was Harry Longabaugh, closed the door behind them.

Young Buck Ripley and Kit Kiley did not come out of the house. The Box X cowhands moved uncertainly.

Harvey Logan, alias Kid Curry, called out to them. "Stand your hands, boys. This is our necktie party."

They put Tate Skelton on a saddled horse and told him he wouldn't need the stirrups. Then they led the horse in under the long ridge log that stuck out about ten feet from the front end of the barn. Kid Curry fastened two saddle ropes together. He threw the rope over the high ridge log and dropped the noose over Tate Skelton's bare head. Then he tied the other end to the protruding end of a log at the corner of the barn, taking up the slack in the rope and tying the knot carefully.

"That'll do it," he said quietly.

"Got anything to say, mister?" Butch Cassidy asked the prisoner.

Tate Skelton wet his dry lips. The hardness was gone from his steel-colored eyes, leaving them glazed and staring. All that cold blooded hatred in his killer's heart and brain had ebbed out of his shivering body, and now there was only the craven fear of a bushwhack killer. Then his mouth sagged open and a scream came from his slack mouth.

Kid Curry slapped the horse on the rump and the horse jumped. The hang-rope tightened, jerking Tate Skelton's six foot body out of the saddle. The long legs doubled up at the knees and kicked out wildly and the scream was choked into a croaking rattle.

The outlaws known as the Wild Bunch watched the death struggles of the hanged man for a few seconds before they turned their heads.

They were the men who had known the old hermit on Sand Creek for a loyal friend. They had all known Fatty Jones and he had been one of their renegade brotherhood. They had camped along the Outlaw Trail with the wanted men Tate Skelton had killed for reward money. And they had respected Sheriff Carlos McCabe for what he had been, a fearless peace officer and a real man. . . .

Inside the log ranch house young Buck Ripley held Kit Kiley in his arms. Her face was buried in the rough flannel of his shirt and she was shuddering. The son of old Buck Ripley was glad that the girl he was going to marry had been unable to watch her only bitter enemy hanged. For all her gameness, Kit Kiley was all woman.

Her saddled horse was out back. Buck's horse was out there also. They mounted their horses and headed for town without looking back.

The Box X cowpunchers followed them after the Wild Bunch had ridden away, their job done. . . .

Old-timers in that part of the Wyoming cow-country will point out the little pile of rocks. They will tell you that is where the killer that some men called Tate Skelton is buried. And they will add that the killer was buried in the fancy clothes and boots he'd worn when he was hunted by the Wild Bunch. Without a pine box for a coffin or a bed tarp for a shroud. And they will call your attention to the ground around the killer's grave where not a blade of grass will grow, although all around and beyond that barren spot the bunch grass and the buffalo grass grows stirrup high. . . .

THE END

ROPE TRICK

While the others argued and complained—and died!—Tex worked patiently on the rope that might have saved them all!

Tex lunged, got his fingers on the man . . .

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

HIS EYES red-rimmed and terribly eager, Seth, the powder monkey, watched Tex Hudlin cease his probing in the dust and filth of the ancient dump, lower the protective bandana from his face and gather up the double handful of cotton and yucca fibres he had salvaged there. When Tex, after eyeing the sun, climbed to the main shelf and entered a room of the ancient cliff dwelling, the powder monkey whimpered a little, got up on rubbery legs and followed. He didn't go into that room. Tex had prohibited that, and Tex was a hard man.

Making strange little noises in his throat, the powder monkey saw Tex kneel beside a cleft in the overhanging rock wall that had attracted the cliff dwellers and served them well as a bulwark against the weather a thousand years ago. Tex drew from that cool, moist cranny beside the spring a man's shirt, rolled up. From inside this lean bundle, he took three small

toasted birds, rolled up the rest and replaced the bundle. Seth licked his lips and held out skinny, shaking hands.

Tex looked at him now, without expression. The cruel desert light struck through the doorway, etching more clearly the grimly chiseled lines of Tex's face above his ragged, reddish beard. He dropped two of the tiny morsels of precious food into Seth's palms and, without a word, stepped past him and sprawled in the sunlight at the verge of the cliff, to take his day's nourishment.

Holding the food against his breast, the powder monkey went to where the mucker, Elmo, lay alongside an ancient masonry wall. Seth knelt there to look down at the man who, at the start, had been the heaviest, the strongest. Now he was like a cadaver, tossing and moaning in a fevered sickness, lifting wasted hands for his ration. But when Seth pressed the cooked bird into his hand, Elmo retched, dropped the food and lay still. The powder monkey popped the bird under his armpit and clamped his arm on it.

Tex watching, said: "Better save it, Seth. If Elmo doesn't eat it, you get none tomorrow."

He turned away, half scornfully, slowly chewing his meal so as to get the most out of it. Presently he rose to stand straight and tall in the sun, searching the little world of cliffs that hemmed his vision. His battered range hat was pulled low over his eyes and the bandana hung from his neck. Otherwise, he wore a filthy shirt, baggy, earth-colored drawers and soft rubber-soled shoes. Some time since, his coat and pants had been unraveled for the yarn they contained.

The powder monkey came down to stand beside him, shielding his sore eyes. "It's gotta come," he said, stupidly. "Help's gotta come sometime."

Tex turned away from him and went over to where his pile of rope lay in a coiled mound. Rope woven of fibres taken from the ancient midden, mixed with wool yarn from his own clothes and those of the man who had died. Seth and Elmo had parted with nothing yet. The nights were getting cold and they had no faith in that unshaven line Tex called a rope.

Tex sat down to twist his fibres into a string and braid them into rope. And Seth, with the unreasoning venom of suffering men, snarled as he watched him. His hatred for Tex left him shaken with a fury of murderous passion. Yet, even as he hated, the powder monkey dreaded the day that Tex finished that rope and went down it three hundred feet to freedom . . . or death. Seth knew that he didn't have nerve to get off this ledge that way. He let his eyes drop to the flat, where their camp had been.

"Help's gotta come some time."

One by one, the powder monkey tallied up the counts he held against Tex. The man had hired him to come on this harebrained quest for gold. He, then, was to blame for what had happened. Afterward, he had taken all tobacco, doling it out bit by bit till it was gone. He had bullied them out of their matches, hoarding them like a miser. He had taken charge of their meager food supply after disaster had marooned them, watching it day and night, denying them while they starved. He had derided them because they wouldn't help in his mad dream of building a rope. He threatened to strip them of their clothes when his yarn ran out.

Seth stood glaring at Tex, brooding, his body trembling with weakness. He knew he was at the end of his strength. Soon he would have to give up, yet Tex seemed to stay strong and resolute. Didn't that prove he was getting more food? Didn't it?

DISASTER had struck these men even as they held their breath in anticipation of high good fortune. Tex, signed by the Professor as guide and scaler, had been first to look up at the ancient houses set on a bench in a cockle-like indentation of the cliff. The Navahoes called the place *Tse-nahale-hogan*—House of the Bird Monster—and avoided it religiously. Tex was the first white man to set foot in it, reaching it by deepening ancient footholds on a tilted ledge stretching upward from the flat. While the Professor poked around in the ruin and sampled the midden, Tex discovered the gold outcrop. He filed on it when he got back to Winslow, where he recruited a hardrock man, powder monkey and a mucker.

Their hopes rode high on that first round of holes, as they crouched behind the ruin walls, waiting for the dynamite to blow. Graduated fuses should have permitted them to count the shots, making sure there were no duds. But, with the perverse unpredictableness of dynamite, the whole thing blew at once.

The wall shielding Tex buckled and split, showering masonry and dust. The ledge under him seemed to lift and sway outward. There was a vast roaring as of an avalanche. Boulders split out of the concave roof and fell crashingly. The hardrock man screamed something about the cliff falling outward, scrambled up and attempted to dash to the back of the ledge. A falling rock crushed a rubble wall, bounced crazily and brushed the hardrock man aside as if he had been a bundle of rags.

Tex, bruised and gasping for breath in the swirling dust, was covered by a battering shower from above. Something struck him cruelly and he lost his senses.

Tex awoke to pain and the chill that belonged to the rarified night air. He detected a faint murmur of voices, tried to wriggle free of the rubble that had cascaded upon him. Failing this, he called weakly.

Elmo, the mucker, a powerfully muscled man, came over to claw him free. The man was sobbing, clinging to Tex, as they staggered out of the ruin. Cold moonlight bathed the shelf, revealing a vast litter of fallen rock, revealing too the battering Elmo had taken. "I—we figgered you was done for, Tex," he whimpered.

Tex hawked dirt from his throat. "I take plenty killin', Elmo. What was it happened? Bill load them holes too heavy?"

"Dunno, Tex. Bill can't talk. Looks like he won't never talk."

"Don't talk like that, Elmo. Bill's tough. He'll be all right."

"Bill's out cold. Arm an' leg busted an' one side smashed. He's low."

Tex grunted, trying his own limbs. Finding nothing serious, he moved over to where Seth sat beside Bill, the hardrock man. Bill was unconscious, gray in the moonlight. He was breathing fast and bubbly, and the powder monkey wiped blood from the blue lips, looking up at Tex with a wistful air of apology.

"Bill was a hard man, Mister Tex. Wouldn't let nobody do nothin' to help him. I'm supposed to be the powder man, but he wouldn't let me go near them holes."

"If he wasn't doing the job right," said Tex, "you should have sung out."

"But he was," said Seth, dully. "I wouldn't have done no different. I can't get it figgered out in my mind."

The stricken man stirred slightly and moaned. Tex examined him. The skin was hot and dry. The right arm and leg were shattered. The other two men were staring, waiting for his judgment. Afraid to speak it, Tex said, "Remember this, you two. He's hurt inside; bleedin' likely. When he wakes up, he'll want water. Don't give him none unless you want to kill him."

"You're batty," growled Seth. "Where the hell we gonna get water now?" He turned his eyes toward the angle where the ceiling joined the shelf. The tiny spring that had served them, and the ancients before them, was piled with debris.

Tex didn't answer questions he had feared to express. This was one hell of a place for a man to be hurt. Well, tomorrow he'd get splints on those busted bones and maybe fetch up rope from the camp. Yeah, that was it. Let Bill down by rope, put him to bed and then ride for a medico at the Indian school, twenty-five miles away.

DAWN broke with a fiery promise of weather. As the light grew, details began to show up. Seth, standing out near the edge, was the first to notice the change. He began whimpering like a lonely puppy. Elmo got out an oath and Tex only stared, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth. Down on the flat, the camp, the corral, burros, everything was buried under tons of slab-by rock. Tex' glance backtracked the line of the avalanche and he saw what the softening rays of the moon had hidden.

Thirty feet of the south end of the shelf, and its canopy of overhanging rock, had sloughed away. Ancient footholds, by which they made their way up and down, mocked them across an unscalable void.

The first ray of the sun shone on wire gold in the newly broken cliff-face. Beautiful. Useless now.

The silence that gripped them all was broken only by the racketing of the piñon jays, and by the whimpering of the frightened powder monkey. Then after a time, the mucker said: "We're trapped. No chance to get down. We'll die here."

They both looked at Tex, waiting for his reaction. But his mind was reaching out for something far more comforting than words. His silence filled Seth with hysteria. The powder monkey caught Tex' lank arms and shook him. "Don't stand there like a sick calf. Say something, damn yuh! We're hung up here; what you gonna do about it?"

Tex slapped Seth's cheeks, forehand and back, and shoved him away. "Shut up," he said, scornfully. "Me, I ain't hollerin' before I'm hurt, or till I know what can be done."

"What can be done," mocked the powder monkey. "Not a damn thing can be done, an' you know it. We're sunk unless somebody comes along an' learns—" He paused, seizing upon the hope. "Yeah, that's it, Mister Tex. We'll be rescued, won't we?"

"I don't know," said Tex, and turned away from them. He made a search for tools, found only one singlejack. The rest had gone down the slide. All day long, he worked away at the spring, removing rocks and earth and cleaning out the little bowl that caught the drip from above. The others never came near him, and he was glad. He wanted to think. A few hours work showed him water would be no problem. But food—that was the rub. Already his stomach was clamoring.

A swishing of wings and a faint squeaking drew his glance upward. Here at the north end of the shelf, nearly five hundred feet from where the blast had brought disaster, the mud nests of a colony of cliff swallows still clung to their precarious holds. Thirty-three of them, Tex counted. The old birds were popping in and out, feeding their young. Should be over a hundred fledglings there. Not much in the way of food, but a lot to starving men.

Dusk was sweeping in when Tex left the spring, the pool filled and a stone drip rigged and working. With him, he brought their canteen, filled to the neck. Elmo was asleep. Seth still knelt beside the hardrock man, shivering. He drank avidly from the canteen and pointed. "Bill's come alive, Mister Tex."

Tex knelt, found the hardrock man's hot, feverish eyes on him. A whisper: "Hullo, Tex. Shoulda studied the dip an' strike uh that rock before shootin', eh? I—I'm cold, Tex."

"I'll make a fire to warm you, Bill," Tex said softly.

"Don't waste wood an' matches, feller. I'm finished, Tex."

"You're tough. You'll drill through."

"No, Tex." There was a darkness to Bill's vision, and Tex raised his head a little, so he could breathe easier. "I hope Seth an' Elmo string their bets with yours, feller. But I dunno about them two. They—"

A paroxysm of choking cut off the words. Tex cried: "Seth, gimme that canteen, quick." But the need for water was gone. Bill Dimmitt had escaped the trap.

Elmo, just wakening, muttered: "Dead. Lucky stiff!"

"God!" Seth's cry quavered. "I've got a woman. I can't die . . . not yet."

"Shut up!" barked Tex, and covered Bill's cold face with his coat.

ELMO and Seth hashed over their plight most of the night and all the next day. Elmo talked continually about the misery of starvation. Seth's pliant was that he was ineligible for death on account of some woman. Finally Tex could stand it no longer. "I've had enough of you two dwellin' on the odds ag'in' us. Long odds, sure. So what? If you can't talk hopeful, keep your big mouths shut. Otherwise I'll heave you both over an' be done with it."

"Want us to talk fairy tales, eh?" sneered Elmo. "To hell with that. I can't see no chance here, or any reason for makin' out like there is. Do you?"

"Yes." Tex' eyes flashed. "We got whatever chance we make, like the boys in the Alamo. Ever hear of that place, an' them men? You never heard of 'em hollerin'. They fought off the Mex army with guts, work, fight an' self denial. All together."

"They died," snorted Seth. "Talk about bein' hopeful—"

"They died game," drawled the Texan. "Not squawlin'. Now gimme all your tobacco an' matches."

He placed their contributions with his own and those taken from Dimmitt's pockets, wrapped them carefully and stored them away. Over Seth's protests, he stripped Bill's body. "Sacrilegious, hell," he snorted. "Bill won't be needin' 'em an' we will."

"For what?"

"For the yarn in 'em, to braid into rope to get us offa here."

"You're crazy as hell," said Elmo. "Never heard anything so far-fetched. You aim to make a three-hundred-foot rope, eh? Even if you had the stuff, it'd take you a year, an' you without no food. I'll stake my chances on bein' rescued."

Tex scooped out a hole in one of the ruined rooms. Elmo and Seth came over to watch the burial, silent now and still smarting from his slurs against their courage. Tex said no word as he covered the body with the ancient dust. He didn't know what to say. At the very last, Seth said: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . ."

Tex felt his strength slipping and knew it was time for food. Seth staggered as he walked. Elmo sat or reclined constantly. Choosing one of the nests where the squeaking was loudest, Tex brought it down with heaved stones. There were four fat, almost fully feathered fledglings in it. Rubbish from a packrat's nest furnished fuel for a fire, their first. Each of the men ate a bird, little more than a mouthful yet an almost instant source of strength.

Hoping to exploit the new energy, Tex invited them down to the midden, or ancient dump, on a slightly lower shelf. Here, earlier, the Professor had taken samples of cotton cloth and fibre strings, perfectly preserved in their arid tomb. With a sliver off a fallen room beam, Tex dug for these things and found them.

These finds seemed to give Seth and Elmo a faint hope in Tex' plan. They came scrambling down and for about an hour worked diligently. Then Elmo complained of sore fingers and Seth found the dust irritating. "Cuts the lungs out of a man," he groused. "A lot of tom foolishment anyhow. Somebody's bound to find us inside a few days." They returned to the main shelf to watch the horizons and comment on the fool schemes some men will bend their efforts to.

Tex could have told them that aside from stray Indians, who avoid such places, there was little chance of their seeing a human being before March—five months or more away—when the Professor expected to return with a party of scientists. Five months! He didn't disillusion them.

With a bone awl he had found, Tex varied his labors in the dusty midden with periods of unraveling yarn from Bill's clothes and cotton strands from fragments of ancient fabric. These, with lengths of yucca and mescal twine found in the dump, he twisted into strands which in turn were braided into ragged quarter-inch line. Save for such time as he spent securing and cooking food, he was endlessly busy during daylight hours. The line became a sizable pile which Tex dared not measure. Three hundred feet is a long way.

ELMO grew sly and began to eye the lessening colony of nests, his face working. Once he rose, braced himself and cast a stone upward. "Don't do that," snapped Tex. "You'll get your bird a day, no more."

"You can't tell me what fer," raged Elmo. "Damn you to hell!" He stooped for another stone. Tex leaped. His swinging right clubbed Elmo down and Tex fell on top of him from shear weakness. He was trembling when he rose.

"I feel responsible," he said, "to get you two plugged nickles out of this. But you don't deserve it. If you'd been willin' to deny yourselves, if you'd had any guts or faith or fight, if you'd bin willin' to help even a little bit, we'd be offa here now. If I wasn't so chicken-livered, I'd make you work for your food. Don't you bother them birds no more, Elmo."

They cowered but spoke no word. His tirade had only added to their fear of him. They took refuge in stubbornness and refused to help him.

One morning they woke shivering, with a cold wind swirling into the cave and cascades falling off the cliff in lacy tor-

rents. Seth begged so piteously for a fire that Tex sacrificed some of their desperately scarce fuel. He spent the day getting out ancient beams and splitting them with the singlejack.

The sun, emerging after the storm, brought proof of the keen-edged sword Time held over them. A young swallow, coaxed out by older birds, planed from its nest, slipped dizzily off on one untried wing, fell like a plummet, caught itself and soared unsteadily. The parent birds, soaring with it, suddenly shrieked and spun away. A shadow crossed Tex' vision. Bullet-like, a hawk dove to its target, snapped the fledgling in lowered talons and flashed upward.

This small but vital loss spurred Tex to action. It took almost all his strength to knock down the remaining mud nests and harvest seventy-nine fat young birds, which were immediately roasted that they might keep better. One man could have eaten them all, without gorging. That night the pack rats, dislodged by Tex when he burned their nest, raided the cache. They had eaten three birds before Tex discovered them. Next day he smoked them out of a niche in the rock and killed ten. The added meat was so great a prize that Elmo and Seth tried to raid the cache that night. Tex beat them and denied them the right to enter that room on any excuse.

After that, the rift between them was wider, deeper. Tex never spoke to them. Nor did he stop his labors. Sometimes he would halt in his work to glare at the little world that swung around him. As if to remind the gods or devils that had marooned them that he stood alone, needing the hand of no man to work out his destiny.

The meat was almost gone. They were filthy, bearded, thin and weak. Coldness had become an agony and the wood was about spent. Tex' coat had gone for its yarn. He was at the point of taking the others', but they were suffering, starving, and his heart failed him. Elmo, long since having lost all hope, went into sort of a coma. Seth pleaded for a larger ration to save him. But Elmo was past eating. He had nothing to live for and he was dead when they woke up one morning.

"You shouldn't have let him die, Mister Tex," Seth said. "It was a sinful thing for you to do."

The charge laid a scar on Tex' spirit. His courage faltered. "I mustn't lose my guts," he mumbled into his beard. "Gotta work an' trust an' . . . fight."

Desperately he spurred himself, but he couldn't work as long now, nor as fast. Sometimes he fell asleep at his work. Seth spent much time sitting beside the body of Elmo, talking to it in a muttered monotone.

Once the powder monkey got up and reeled down to him, standing over him on trembling legs. "We're alone," he shrieked. "Just you an' me. You never talk to me. You hate me, an' I don't care. But I gotta hear a voice, you understand? Talk to me, damn you." He hauled off and kicked Tex. The effort brought him to earth. He sat there weeping, and Tex kept braiding, never speaking or moving.

One bleak, frosty dawn, Tex wakened with a screaming laugh in his ears. He stumbled out onto the shelf, where the powder monkey stood silhouetted against the paling sky. Seth's arms were outstretched. "Rosie," he cackled. "It's Rosie, Mister Tex. Come to save us. Up here, Rosie. Here!"

Tex was creeping toward the powder monkey when Seth cried: "Rosie, thank God!" and stumbled toward the brink. Tex lunged, got his fingers on the man. He couldn't hold. It seemed as if he stood there an endless time, shuddering, waiting for that aching scream to fade out, waiting for the echo of that faint, far impact to drift back.

WORKING against time now, Tex crowded his waning strength. Daily he cursed his weakness, the echo of his own voice startling him. For the first time, he dared measure the rope, spanning his full reach forty-nine times. It left him a little short. He had two birds and one rodent left. It took him three days to braid that last twenty feet. Then, having anchored one end to a boulder, he moved to the brink on rubbery legs to lower the line, yard by yard. He couldn't see if it reached; he had to assume that it did, for there was no more yarn. Tex

laughed and cried by turn as he built a fire with the last of the fuel and ate the very last of the meat.

Huddled beside his fire, Tex slept the night through. The sun woke him, drew him out on the shelf for the stern test. Thankfulness was running strongly in him and, as he looked down at Elmo, he indulged his first softness. "Pore feller," he murmured. "Wisht we could uh come through this together. Wisht I had somebody to be thankful with."

Tex stood like an attenuated ghost in the sunlight, regretting that he must leave the rope behind. It was more than just a few braided strands. It was a partner, with a heart, a soul. A child of his hands and his brain. Hard to leave it. He moved toward the edge, and then he had halted, staring. A piece of rock had flashed downward before his vision. Then something that half floated as it fell, something with a glowing coal of fire at one end and a little coil of smoke drifting behind it. A cigarette butt!

From the sky, a voice dropped. "Smell wood smoke, boys. It's coming from the cave. Lower away; I'll know in a minute."

Squinting through bloodshot eyes, Tex watched those dangling boots appear and lower, and then a man turning lazily in a sling. A strong, smiling man who called: "Hullo! You Tex Hudlin?"

"Yeah." Tex felt overcome with stupidity. "Tex Hudlin, an' either crazy or dreamin'. Who are you?"

He caught the light line tossed by the man who dangled twenty feet out from the brink, pulled him into a safe footing. The fellow stepped out of his harness and took Tex' hand. "I'm Jim Pawley, friend of the Professor's." His keen eyes took in all the details of this man trap, including the rigid, naked corpse of Elmo. "You've had a time for yourself, eh?"

As he told about it, Tex got to trembling so bad he had to sit down. He was all to pieces and the faint aroma of tobacco reminded him how he needed a cigarette.

He begged one and while he was dragging down the sweet smoke, Pawley examined the rope. "You made this, eh?" He tested its strength, looked at Tex as if weighing him, and tested again. "Marvelous piece of work, Hudlin."

It was good to talk again to somebody appreciative, good to tell about the rope. "All the way," he finished, "it was a race between the rope an' starvation. How'd you know we was trapped here?"

"Didn't. You see, I'm with the National Laboratory of Anthropology. The Professor got me excited telling about *Tse-nahale-hogan,* the gold you discovered, canyons filled with cliff dwellings. I had to see for myself. Got here just in time, looks like."

"Time," laughed Tex, "quit matterin' last night. I was about to let myself down."

"I see." The man made a great show of admiring each yard of the rope, as he pulled it up, coiling it neatly. "No need of risking that now, Hudlin. Get into the sling and go up to a good breakfast. It's waiting. Ham, eggs, biscuits, coffee . . ."

"Coffee," muttered Tex, then bit his lip and grew stubborn. "Sounds powerful good, friend, but it's gotta wait. There's some things down at camp that I want to—oh, hell, I want to go down the way I planned. You savvy how I feel, don't yuh?"

"I understand." Pawley was thoughtful. "But while we're at it, let's lower your partner so we can bury him." And without awaiting argument, he walked over to knot the line around the body and carry it out to the edge. Braced and paying out line slowly, Tex watched Pawley lower away. Watched him through sort of a fog.

And, suddenly, Pawley was recoiling from the brink, the strain on the line abruptly released. Once again the faint echo of impact came from far below. Pawley's eyes came to Tex. "Your . . . your dead partner saved you, Hudlin," he said, shakily.

Tex shook his head. The rope had saved him. Even in breaking, even if it had dropped him instead of a man already dead, it had saved him. In those dark days it had been his anchor, his faith, his beacon. Without it, guts, fight, self-denial were just words.

"The rope saved me, Pawley. But maybe you wouldn't understand."

• GUN GAMBLER OF

Up and down the great Mississippi swept the fame of Captain Jesse Wilder, gentleman, duellist, gambler. A swashbuckling, compelling drama of river renegades and frontiersmen — who mixed hot blood with cold steel!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Before Breakfast

THE early November light was perfect that morning in the early '70's. The air was crisp and bracing. There was a light dew on the grass. Better ground than that, under the great-

THE BIG MUDDY • •

By TOM ROAN

The wharf boss went backward, the whip still in his hand . . .

Dramatic Novel of the River Frontier

spreading oaks a couple of stone-throws from the river, could not have been found anywhere on the outskirts of New Orleans. It had just the right feel to it; smooth and silky but not slippery. Yes, just the right kind of ground for two men to settle an "affair of honor" with a pair of lightning blades. One man to dance and parry, and live to dance and parry again; the other to make a blunder—and go to hell with cold steel through his heart.

Captain Jesse Wilder stretched his long, lean figure and yawned as he glanced at the rising sun across the river. He was not interested in the French geese-honking and fevered gesticulations that had broken out again in the M. Denis Lalaurie

crowd. Confound it, the jangling should have at least been settled before the two coaches and fours of that gay-dog crowd of young rowdies reached the fighting grounds. But, no, even after everything was settled the Lalaurie bunch were the kind to spit and sputter like a barnyard in an uproar.

Jesse Wilder was not particularly concerned except for one thing. His boat, the *Rebel,* was due to pull away from her dock within an hour after sunrise for her long voyage up the Mississippi and into the dangerous Missouri. There was plenty of time yet, of course. Perhaps it would be even better if the duel was delayed a few minutes. Tales of such affairs spread quickly. If he got to his boat at the last minute he might beat the story of the before-breakfast engagement, and save himself the whispers of his latest escapade that would be sure to go on night and day among passengers and crew until the *Rebel* reached the Yellowstone.

Lalaurie was well-seconded. The two big coaches had been jammed with the man's friends. Wilder had arrived in a coach with a rough-handed driver he scarcely knew and Chattanooga Jim, a prematurely gray Negro of fifty, one of his father's former slaves. Lalaurie's crowd had set up a hen-cackling about a white man having a Negro for a second, but Wilder had known how to handle that.

"Gentlemen," he had sneered, "Chattanooga Jim has been with me since I can remember. He buttoned the first pair of pants on me. He is very capable, I assure you, and for my second second—well, the coachman who brought me will do. Chattanooga Jim will be kind enough to assist you in loading Lalaurie's carcass back in his damned fine hack when I tire of looking at the color of his blood. I'm certain of this, for Chattanooga Jim has never failed to render such service to the dead and dying in the past."

It had been a little speech to make their blood boil, but, hang them, they had asked for this thing when Lalaurie slapped his face only last night in the Old Absinthe House. Lalaurie had been sparring for it ever since the *Rebel* had come down the river four days ago. The fool was a handy one with a blade who thought he had to have someone to chop up now and then. And if he made good with his chopping this morning more fame for him would again go up and down the rivers as the best swordsman in all New Orleans.

A sudden hush in the Lalaurie crowd told Wilder they were ready for the work that lay before them. He glanced at Chattanooga Jim. The Negro had his hat off, big bald head shining like smooth black rubber in the light. The thin half-moon of gray hair around it came down past his ears to make the fluffy white "mutton chops" on his cheeks. Jim had his eyes half-closed. The old sinner was praying but not afraid.

It was not long now. Wilder and Lalaurie knew what they were here for. The latter's little waxed mustaches twitched as he stepped gingerly forward. They faced each other; both men tall, neither yet quite thirty. Of the two Lalaurie was the heaviest, probably a hundred and ninety against Wilder's one seventy-five. The Frenchman's lips and cheeks were as red as ripe cherries, but the rest of his face was like old ivory. Wilder's lip curled. He saw that Lalaurie had added a bit of coloring to his face.

They saluted, smiling. Oh, very proper, this! In two seconds more the rapiers were in the work. Long, thin blades with the light dancing up and down them, the good steel slithering and crashing like living things. Lalaurie was flashy and darting, even a trifle playful at the start. Damned grand airs, the French! Showmanship—something of a cocksure prizefighter, Wilder thought, who wanted to give his foppish backers a little exhibition of boxing before laying his opponent flat on his back.

JESSE WILDER always seemed to start slowly. His real swordsmanship had begun on a battlefield with Jackson and Morgan the Raider, where one had no time for play. He backed, parried and sidestepped, waiting and watching the Frenchman's eyes even more than the man's blade. Eyes and the sudden twitching of lips were the things to watch. They foretold, in their own lightning way,

every snap of action to come. Lalaurie was trying to work him around where the rising sun would be catching him in the eyes. The thought of the man thinking him such a fool snapped Wilder into action. Hell, he had given Lalaurie credit for better than that!

It was quick and furious while it lasted. In the midst of it Wilder appeared to falter ever so slightly as if his foot had slipped. Lalaurie took the bait—oh, so very neatly, so very nicely. In that one split-second where life and death hung, Jesse Wilder's blade was quicker, like an explosion on the thrust with Lalaurie a fraction of an instant late in his attempt to parry.

In and under, that was it, the quick way to the heart. Lalaurie's blade flashed, slithered, and went over Wilder's death-bound steel. As if a jerk stopped them, there they stood for the horrible time in which one might have counted three—breast to breast, Lalaurie's blade wabbling foolishly on the empty air, Wilder's blade through him, all the way to the hilt. The rest of the blade, remarkably clear of blood, extending out his back.

Suddenly Wilder leaped backward. The blade came out like a knife from butter. Wilder got out of the way to make room for the dead Frenchman to drop. As he struck the grass Lalaurie made one convulsive twist that brought him over on his back, face a ghastly mask of death in the mellow light. As he flopped over, his seconds came rushing forward, horror in their eyes.

"There's still time for another, you black-blooded swine!" Wilder's voice was as hard as the steel in his hand. "The ground is perfect, the light is just right."

He waited a few moments, the silence now as ugly as murder in a closet. The eyes of one young Don Andre were upon him, and they were eyes as black as a hogshead of tar in their beady, snake-like fury. Half-French, half-Spanish, that gay-blade cockerel. Jesse Wilder met his stare unflinchingly and bowed coldly, a smirk of contempt on his face. In a voice of honey soaked in the devil's blood, he spoke:

"Do me the honor, my dear friend Don Andre, to add your carcass to the pile they are loading in the coach. I believe you preferred pistols when you killed wheezing old Elbert Wheeler on this spot a few months ago after snaring him into a duel."

"Let it be the next time you come down the River!" snarled the don. "I'll kill you, like the Rebel dog you are!"

"Oh, yes, I remember now." Wilder's voice was still low, acid-sweet. "I believe the Andres did pitch their lot with the North. But," he shrugged and glanced at the sky, "the light is beautiful. I may be a long time coming back down the river. Montana Territory may hold me for a spell this time. It's a country of men up there. You cursed my Negro when he came with a humble head to prepare his match with Lalaurie. What right, *sir,* may I ask, has a gentleman of your complexion to curse my Negro?"

"Pierre! . . . *Pierre!*" screamed the don. *"The pistols!"*

"And in the meanwhile," that cold, sardonic smile was still on Jesse Wilder's face, "some one had better give the gentleman a drink."

Eleven minutes later Don Andre lay dead on the cold grass with a pistol ball driven squarely between his eyes.

"The weapons are most excellent," Wilder was bowing again, cold, steel-gray eyes on another victim, "and perhaps you, my popeyed cockroach, would care to take up where your friends left off. You'll pardon me if I can't remember your name."

But they had had enough and were scurrying for their coaches. They plopped into them with the body of the don, cursing at their coachmen to get the devil out of here. One after the other the coaches sped away. Wilder's shoulders appeared to sag for just a moment, then they were squared again. Even old age, when he reached it, would never take the cavalryman out of that gun-barrel back.

"The gentlemens shore got all they want, didn't they, Cap'n Jesse?" Chattanooga Jim had come forward, throwing Wilder's black broadcloth cape around him and gave him an affectionate hug. "Even hawgs know enough to turn 'way from a trough when belly an' mouth won't hold no mo'."

"Were you scared, Jim?"

"I ain't never scared when yo've got good steel or a fine pistol in your hand. Look, Cap'n Jesse, they've done run off an' left their pistols an' so'ds."

"Pick them up and bring them along," ordered Wilder. "I'll charge you with cleaning and oiling them before you hang them on my cabin wall. It's a pity to treat fine weapons like that."

"There's one thing I wanta tell you now." Chattanooga Jim had turned, watching the last coach disappear. "When I wanted to he'p 'em get the first gentlemens in the coach they said somethin'. They said you an' yo' *Rebel* wouldn't never get to Montana this time. They aims to get back at you some way."

"By this time," Wilder frowned, "I'm quite used to such things."

CHAPTER TWO

Shades of Shiloh

HE WAS in one of his cold-stone, cold-sober moods when they headed for the waterfront along the deep-rutted river road that wound along under the trees. Some people liked Captain Jesse Wilder best in a fighting mood. There was always a don't-give-a-damn air about him then. Laughter came from him at the slightest excuse. But when in those cold-sober moods he was like one far-fetched from everything, alone and aloof, in a world entirely his own.

Chattanooga Jim, ebony face entirely emotionless, sat in the seat in front of him. Knowing his every whim since childhood, Jim was the only man who knew how to handle him when the sulky moods were upon him. But even a stranger would have noticed the bile rising in him when they came in sight of the long wharf below the levee where the *Rebel* was lying with pale-blue smoke bannering from her two tall, black-painted funnels.

The *Rebel* was a belle of the river. She was flat-bottomed like all boats constructed sensibly, and strong enough to dare the treacherous shoals and swift water of the Missouri. Her black hull never drew more than thirty inches when her lower decks and strong-rooms were piled high and stuffed with cargo. For the rest of her, she was dazzling white, trimmed with red and black from her elaborately scrolled and prettied rails to those tall smokestacks high-ringed with crimson bands.

Crowds of passengers were already aboard, swarming in and out of the cabins and lining the rails. For the most part it was the old, old story of river traffic during these half-mad times just after the war.

Painted women stood with the high-hatted men, the gamblers, politicans, lawyers and thieves. An important, fine-aired lot they were, bound for the various "gold coasts" on the far frontiers of the Upper Missouri where brawny plainsmen, traders and trappers had gone on a few years before to make it safe for the hell breed of scum to follow.

Scads of this same nefarious crowd filled even the open top deck that rivermen called the Texas, but rougher looking men were aboard, especially jamming the lower decks where there was less pomp and the fares were cheaper. Mobs of them were of the Texas long-hair variety,

buffalo hunters, Indian scouts and prospectors—each armed like a pirate ready to board a merchantman.

"Mr. Monahan," intoned Chattanooga Jim, suddenly breaking the silence for the first time, "must be drunk again."

Whether one Patrick Monahan was drunk or sober, the loading of the *Rebel* was most certainly not yet finished. Great bales, crates, bundles and boxes still lay on the wharf. The wharf boss was on the job with a big revolver at his hip and a ten-foot length of black-snake rawhide in his hand to drive the Negro roustabouts.

He was a burly devil, well over six feet, as tough a river mongrel as a man would find. He had been a former overseer from some Englishman's plantation. And the English of the I-am-the-lord variety were generally known for handling their slaves only with an iron hand.

As the coach turned down the steep slope one of the roustabouts, struggling with others around a bale of goods, suddenly slipped and fell. Before he could get to his feet the wharf taskmaster was upon him, the rope slashing out—the Negro crying with pain and terror. The overseer was still beating the Negro mercilessly when the coach reached the wharf.

Captain Wilder came hopping out. "Let that boy alone, you lout!" he yelled, and the next moment he was hurrying toward the burly one. "You're not a whipping boss for some island planter now!"

"But—but," sneered the wharf boss, turning suddenly upon him, "your captain Tom Lang has been riding me like a confounded mule about this cargo since midnight. Hellfire, man—they've got to be kicked around!"

"Not when they work for me!" snapped Wilder. "I handle them without kicking them in the face or whipping them with a knotted rope."

"I've heard that," smirked the wharf boss. His fist started for Wilder's jaw.

WILDER was close to him by this time, and his right fist shot up, harder than a pine knot. It caught the overseer on the point of the jaw, seeming to tear him from the deck of the wharf like a tree being pulled up by the roots. Before he could fall a left hook caught him on the side of the face, skinning across it, breaking his nose. The overseer was down, knocked cold and senseless on the wharf.

"I'll take no back talk from a whipping boss like you. Here you, boys!" Wilder glared around him at the roustabouts. "I want this cargo aboard. Pay attention to Captain Tom Lang over there. He'll show you where to stow this stuff. Nothing broken, mind you. Get it aboard nicely, safely. When the job is done, I'll set a five-gallon keg of rum on the wharf for all you boys, and each one of you gets five dollars extra from me. What do you say to that?"

"Lawd, Lawd!" cried a shining-toothed black. "Cap'n Jesse done come talkin' now! Come on we oughta done been eatin' up two steamboats long befo' this time!"

At once a half-wild chant arose:

"Mama, Mama, I'm a 'round de bend steamboat man,
Comin' down the ribbah, blowin' for a place to lan'!"

Wilder paid the coachman eight times his fee and went on aboard. Chattanooga Jim followed him with the fine rapier and pistol cases. Short, stoop-shouldered Captain Tom Lang—one of the best rivermen the Mississippi or Missouri had ever seen—was at the head of the gangplank. The old man's thin, gray-bearded face twisted into a questioning frown as he looked Wilder up and down.

"You've been into something, Jesse," he growled. "Don't know what it is, don't know that I care, but I wish you would drag that drunken fool you call a first mate out of his bunk and kick him over the side."

Wilder strode on and up the port companionway. The early-arriving passengers were everywhere, howling to gangs on the wharf. Wilder went up and up to the Texas with everybody staring at him, then forward to a small cabin half-under the pilot house. Chattanooga Jim was still at his heels when he stopped at the door and looked around.

"You know what to do for drunks?"

Then Wilder gave the Negro a nod. "Get it!"

"Yes, suh!" A grin spread instantly over Chattanooga Jim's broad face. "With the mostest, *mostest* pleasure, Cap'n Jesse."

Inside the cabin Wilder found Mr. Patrick Monahan lying flat on his back in his bunk, a whale of a red-faced Irishman with great handle-bar mustaches and a button of beard as large around as a dime and two inches long on his chin. Wilder caught him by the shoulder, gave him a violent twist that hurled him out of the berth. Monahan yelled and tried to come up fighting. Half-up, he fell back, gasped and groaned drunkenly.

"Aye!" he growled sleepily, "aye! I thought the dommed Yankees had me again at Shiloh!"

"You whelp!" raged Wilder. "I should kick your teeth down your throat, you red-faced, rusty-headed Irish lug! For two pins I'd slit your belly and throw you overside to the alligators."

"'Twould be yer duty, I'm shure." The Irishman grinned. "But be me meat as tough as I feel, 'twould be dommed little favor ye'd be showin' the 'gators. Faith," he clamped both hands to his temples, "me head feels like a bucket of lead."

"Here!" Wilder had turned to the door where Chattanooga Jim had come back with a glass in his hand. "Let this down your gullet and see how you feel!"

"Aye, aye!" grinned the Irishman, stupidly, "yer heart is bigger than me mother's washboard." He seized the glass Wilder thrust into his hand, downing the yellowish contents furiously. Then, in a fit of sputtering and coughing, he yelled: "Faith, be ye tryin' to murder me? 'Twas it poison?"

"Epsom salts with a shot of whiskey in it." Wilder grinned. "If you're not on the job in thirty minutes, then you can pack your duffle, and I'll see that you are pitched headfirst on the wharf!"

He was a liar, he knew it, and even the whiskey-seasoned Monahan knew it. Monahan had been his first sergeant when they'd been shot to hell at Shiloh. Monahan had dragged him away from the firing line at Mannassas. It would be easier to cut off his leg than to fire Monahan. All he could do was to growl to himself as he made his way to his cabin for a bite of breakfast while the passengers were still coming aboard.

CHAPTER THREE

A Girl Makes a Bargain

HIS cabin—if such an elaborate suite could have been called a cabin—was forward of the gentlemen's salon and straight below the pilot house. Constructed for complete privacy, its after bulkhead ran from the starboard rail to the port, chopping off that much of the promenade decks where round ports covered with curtains gave him a chance to take a squint down the rails all the way to the stern at either side of the boat. He had really hogged the end of the boat, having his own walkway outside his broad half-circle of windows that always gave him a commanding view of the river.

Chattanooga Jim helped him into lighter clothing and changed his boots for him while a little high-yellow stewardess called Christmas Gift brought him his breakfast. He took his leasure about everything and sat there scowling from time to time, head cocking to one side now and then as he listened to the rumble of trucks, blocks and the noise of heavy cases being brought on to the cargo deck below. It was taking a devil of a while, but the steady sounds were going on with the rhythm of clockwork. Before leaving Captain Lang he had told the old man what to do about those now fast-working blacks down there, and Lang never failed to carry out an order.

Wilder ordered more coffee and arose and went to a port window when the five-minute-all-aboard whistle on top of the pilot house blew, sending its mournful blast up and down the river. A wild cheering lifted from the wharf roustabouts. One of them had spotted him up there, and soon it was a riot below with dancing Negroes holding up shining new silver dollars and pointing to the keg of rum. A song went up for him.

"Standin' on de landin' with money
in my han'
Lookin' for a woman whut ain't got
no man!"

He stepped back, putting himself out of sight. The rush was coming now. A coach tore down on the wharf, sweat-dripping horses galloping. Two men and a girl got out, but he caught only a glimpse of them. Others were coming, hurrying along on foot with their luggage, the wharf roustabouts rushing to them to make anywhere from a dime to a dollar tip to help them aboard.

Wilder turned and started to pace. Hands behind his back, he was staring upstream when the whistle mourned again and a gentle shiver slowly made itself felt all over the boat. The big red paddlewheel astern was beginning to turn. He heard the fall of the last rope coming aboard.

"Montana, Montana," half-crooned Chattanooga Jim as he brought the coffee, "listen to our paddlewheel a-turnin', 'cause heah we come!"

It seemed only a minute after that before somebody knocked on the door. Jim went to it. Wilder did not turn until the excited voice of red-faced little Mr. Sharpe, the purser, came to him:

"Orders are orders, madam!"

"Please!" pleaded a girl's voice.

Wilder turned and saw her, a golden-haired, stunning creature in blue with tears in her eyes. And even as Wilder turned she broke past Mr. Sharpe and came rushing on into the cabin.

"Captain Wilder, damn it, sir," Wilder had never seen Sharpe—called Pinky by most every man on board—in such a dither, "I've got to stop the boat—"

"Come inside and shut that door!" snapped Wilder. "Unless, of course, you're making a speech for the benefit of all aboard."

"You're Captain Wilder?" The girl gave Sharpe no chance for a reply as he turned to close the door. "You—"

"I once had the honor of the rank," he bowed. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Grant Morrell's aboard!" cried Sharpe in desperation. "At the last minute, sir. This woman came with him."

"I see." Wilder's eyes flashed, "And you, madam—"

"I am his sister." The girl dropped into a chair in front of the coffee service. "Please, you must not put us off! Oh, I know you have orders that Grant is never to board this boat again, but—but—"

"He's below with the cargo deck passengers, sir," cut in Sharpe. "I was busy at the ticket cage—"

"Give me just five minutes with Captain Wilder, please!" half screamed the girl, springing to her feet. "You—you can't stop! You can't go back!" There was terror in her eyes now and Wilder was shocked by the sudden notion that she was going to faint. "Five minutes, please, I beg you."

"Come back," Wilder glanced at his watch, then at the excited purser, "in thirty—no, forty minutes, Mr. Sharpe. I don't have to go out of my way backtracking to a wharf to get something like Grant Morrell off the boat. We can heave him off by the nape of the neck and the seat of the pants. Yes, forty minutes, Mr. Sharpe."

He watched the girl as she half-slid back in her chair. Cheap theatricals often faced a man aboard a riverboat, but there was something that touched him as the real thing here. He reached for the brandy decanter as Mr. Sharpe retired. Chattanooga Jim took himself out of sight.

"A nip of this, madam," he ordered, filling a long-stemmed goblet. "It will brace you."

She was trembling so violently he had to hold the brandy to her lips. By the way she choked on it he knew she was not used to such stuff. She got it down, and then was out of her chair. She crossed to the port side, pressing her face to a window, trying to look back downstream. He watched her quietly, empty goblet in one hand, decanter in the other. Then he saw her notice the draped port, and she was peering out. He spoke, voice flat.

"I imagine you can't see much for the crowd that must still be hanging over the rail. What's Grant done this time, Miss Morrell?"

SHE did not answer him. She was still trying to peer through the crowds along the rail. Grant Morrell was into something again, and it was a tough pickle this time—unless this girl was the easy kind to go to pieces and become panic-struck whether she *was* his sister or not. He spoke again:

"If you're expecting the police launch, it won't overtake us. They never have up enough steam to pull a finger out of a lard barrel."

He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes had passed before she turned back to him and sank herself again in the chair. There was still hot coffee on his heavy silver service.

He poured a cup for her, added a shot of brandy, sugar and cream, and held the concoction to her lips. She gulped it down, spilling a little on her chin. He dabbed it away with a napkin. When she looked up and tried to smile she was so pale she frightened him.

"Grant killed a man this morning." She got that out in a low, matter-of-fact voice. "In Pirates' Alley."

"He did!" Wilder reached for the brandy decanter. "Now I'd better have a stout one. Things like that always shake me. Knife or gun?"

"A knife, I suppose." She looked up again. "That's Grant's usual way. But things like that don't shake you, Captain Wilder. You've drawn blood with blade and gun in the past. Only this morning you killed twice before you had your breakfast. The Mr. Basil Larkinbur who helped us make our last-minute escape out the back way of our hotel told us about it on the way to the landing in the coach."

"Very nice of him, I'm sure!" He scowled and downed his drink. "But I don't bluff very well, Miss Morrell, if—"

"I—I didn't mean it that way, Captain Wilder. You and Grant were soldiers on the battlefield together . . ."

"I saw him twice in battle." There was hot gray steel in his eyes now. "He was going away from the fight each time as fast as a horse could take him!"

"Let's not go into that, please." He saw the quick tears in her eyes. "There are not many who know that he had a sunstroke and weeks of brain fever when a child. Sometimes he is not entirely—accountable. No, please!" she held up her hand, seeing the doubt flash in his eyes. "I won't lie. I—I come to you with clean hands—"

"Then let's finish with this!" he snapped, pulling out his watch again. "Crying women—"

"Please!" Her hand came up again, trembling as she tried to hold herself. "I—I'm making my last stand. We were going on West. I thought we were. Out there, they say, it is a chance for a new life, a new beginning. He took the last of the money to purchase teams, a wagon—"

"And lost it across a poker table in a gambling hall!"

"I suppose that was the way." She seemed to be crumbling before his unyielding stare and blazing eyes. "But—but take us west, on to Montana Territory. I'll pay, honestly, Captain Wilder. They say I have a good voice. Grant says you own a theater at Battle Stand, on—on the Missouri, I believe. We talked it all over this morning. I can play almost any musical instrument. We'll get a start—"

"Good Lord!" he cried, the whole thing now falling upon him like the burning roof of a house coming in. "Grant sent you to—to come to me with this? He would stoop so low as—as—" he broke off helplessly for a moment, then came back fighting. "Look here, *look here*, damn it, you have the markings of a lady. Do you know what kind of a place he's really talking about—"

"A theater—"

"Theater, hell!" he cried. "Madam, I own no dive in Montana. No woman has ever sung and danced with drunks for me. . . . Now, what the hell!"

"I—didn't think Grant would do this—to me!" She was up, so white she looked like she was dying. "Please! I—"

"Jim! *Jim!*" he yelled as he caught her when she was falling, as weak as a string in his arms, and laid her back in the chair. "Get somebody, quick! And—and tell Sharpe to stay out of here. This poor girl has fainted."

CHAPTER FOUR

Pursued River Shark

CHATTANOOGA JIM was not long. Strutting in his blue coat, gold buttons and mutton chops, he could always be depended on to do a thing well. While he was gone Wilder wrung out a towel in cold water and placed it to the girl's face. Then Christ-

mas Gift came in, followed swiftly by a tall high-yellow called Lily Bell, the head stewardess. Wilder picked up the unconscious girl, carying her to his big berth in his sleeping quarters where he left the two women to their duty. Lily Bell's voice came to him as he paced the cabin with black murder in his heart.

"Honey, she sho' is a beauty, ain't she?"

He continued to pace and stare at the river, but he was not seeing the water. Grant Morrell's wolf-lean figure and sharp face seemed to burn in front of him. Damn, what a man! How nice it would be at this very moment to get his hand on Grant's long, skinny neck and slowly press that big, bobbing Adam's apple out of his throat!

It would not trouble his conscience to kill such a man in cold blood—not when he looked at the little reminders all about him of a score and ten battlefields and furious skirmishes. Grant Morrell was like a well-bred dog gone wrong. Up and down the rivers from St. Joseph to New Orleans men knew him for a tin-horn card cheat and a quick rat with a knife. Not a captain on the rivers wanted him aboard any more than an over-ripe case of smallpox.

"Cap'n Jesse," intoned Lily Bell, "all dat young lady needs is sumpum nice to eat. Yas, suh, an' that's all. I got it out uv her, suh. She ain't had a bite in fo' days. Christmas Gift's done gone for de vittles, Cap'n Jesse."

"Stay with her," he ordered, and waved the woman away before the full realization of what she had said fell upon him like a shot.

Four days without food! A man, now, it would not matter. He, himself, had gone seven without a scrap of food during those terrible seven days of blood-letting at Malvern Hill. Still—damn it!—he could not be a sentimental fool about this. People rarely got the best of him, but this time it was a woman. In desperation he turned and snapped his fingers when Chattanooga Jim came in.

"I knows, Cap'n Jesse." The Negro came forward and patted his shoulder. "I couldn't he'p hearin' some of the talk. Times come when a man's up again somethin' he can't shove down or crawl ovah or dig 'imself under. I saw Mistah Grant hidin' below. Looks like a half-skint polecat the hounds have pulled back'ards through a hollow log."

"You've seen the man with him?"

"Yes, sir." At times Chattanooga Jim dropped almost every smattering of his Negro dialect. "Short an' round, kiss-me-honey mustache. A damned Yankee carpet-bagger out an' out, or plain po' white trash actin' like money in the bank. Loud-plaid suit, hard hat an' a big seegar. He was trying to start a crap-shootin' game with the roustabouts, suh."

"Has Mr. Sharpe taken money for his fare yet?"

"Oh, he did that first thing!" declared Jim. "Not knowin' who he was, suh."

He had another drop of brandy and plopped himself into a chair after that. Christmas Gift came in with a big tray. Knowing his love for coffee she had brought an extra pot for him. He sat there sipping until Lily Bell brought him her report.

"She went aftah them vittles lak folkses dyin' of plum starvation, Cap'n Jesse, then she roll ovah an' drops dead asleep."

"All right," he nodded. "You're a wonder, Lily Bell. Have Christmas Gift stay with her. She's not to be disturbed regardless of what happens or who comes. You can go back to your main job now."

When he arose Chattanooga Jim had anticipated him. Jim was ready with a heavier coat, one that came almost to his knees. The Negro helped him into it, handed him a carefully brushed hat, and last—but always—a fine pair of revolvers to slip into his waistband.

A surprise awaited him when he stepped into the Gentlemen's Salon. There was a sudden hush of talk. He had expected that, but he never expected the wild Apache yell that greeted him, loud enough to drown the double-barreled roar of a shotgun had one been fired.

"Hi-yah, Cap'n Jesse!"

For a split-second it looked like hell flying up from a table. Over went the table, the bottles and the glasses. Men around the table went backward in their chairs with it. Out of that flying mêlée a giant in loudly fringed and beaded yellow buckskins arose. It was a two-gun man with a ten-inch knife and a buffalo hunt-

er's tube of poison swinging from a chain around his neck.

Big gray hat in hand, long red hair and beard covering his face, the giant came wading forward—damnation to everybody and everything around him. Two seconds later a pair of arms strong enough to wrestle a grizzly were around Wilder.

"Dammit, it's good to see yuh!" roared on the giant. "I been a-lookin' both my eyes out for yuh ever since I come aboard!"

"Texas Bill!" gasped Wilder when he could get his breath and shove the big arms down to grip the giant's hand. "The last time, Bill, it was at Antietam!"

"Shore 'twas!" bellowed on the giant. "We took a lickin' an' got shot to ribbons, but we killed fourteen hundred more damned Yankees than they killed of us Rebs! Belly up to the bar, folks, an' call yore dogs! Texas Bill Brady's buyin' drinks for the whole steamboat!"

But Texas Bill Brady did not get to buy that round of drinks. From the cargo deck a sudden crash of shots sounded, punctuated by an outlandish yelling. Wilder whirled, Texas Bill a noiseless bull behind him on moccasined feet. When they reached the cargo deck everything was still in an uproar.

A ROUGH-LOOKING, rough-shod man with a red carpet-bag beside him lay dead on the deck. Another—a short, black-bearded Texan—stood crowded back against a tall crate of cargo with a hot revolver in one hand and the other gripped to his stomach, the blood spilling through his fingers. Beyond all that was Pat Monahan, backed against a great stack of bales by a burly man in buckskins holding him there with a knife against his throat. Texas Bill Brady roared:

"Hold, Cactus Charley! *Hold!* Damnit, that's a friend of mine!"

"Yuh better come get 'im, then, Bill!" answered the man with the knife, recognizing Brady's voice and slowly backing away. "I'll kill the flannel-mouth, him a-knockin' me down for hittin' a damn Yankee."

"Faith, an' dom the dommed Yankees, I say," gasped Monahan, once more left alive by the skin of his teeth. "'Twas only me duty I was followin' in tryin' to stop the foight."

It was just another one of those things when they got to the bottom of it—a quarrel over cards going beyond words, the usual snatching for guns, one man dead and the other now sliding down the side of the crate to die. Texas Bill Brady and Monahan could handle this, and Brady would soon have Monahan as thick as flies in syrup with this half-loco Texas crowd.

Wilder looked around for Grant Morrell. He did not see him and from what had been said he had not been connected with the game. But Basil Larkinbur was on hand. A man could not have missed him had he been only a flea among a million on a sandpile. Chattanooga Jim had not half-described him!

There he stood in a ginger-brown suit with great red plaids. A little doeskin-colored peanut shell of a hard hat sat on the back of his head to show his pretty curls. One leg crossed, one hand in his pocket, he leaned against a large box, picking his teeth with a goosequill. Short and dumpy, squat neck swallowed to the ears in a winged collar with a blood-red cravat sawed around it, he wore a watch chain strung across his belly like a trace chain. One thought struck Jesse Wilder as he stepped over to him: Nature constructed some damned queer things at times.

"Larkinbur's the name." A short, pudgy hand came forward. "You must be Wilder. I've heard the name. How's Gracie? Tell her I'll be dropping up to see her soon."

"'Gracie,' eh?" Wilder ignored the hand. "So that's her name?"

"I pretty 'em up some." Larkinbur blankly shoved his unaccepted hand back in his pocket. "My way with women. Have a cigar? Ten cents straight, no three for a quarter stuff."

"Looks like it," nodded Wilder. "Did they throw in that suit and hat with it?" Then, giving him no chance to reply: "Where's Grant?"

"He's over there." Larkinbur nodded toward the head of the boat. "Go easy with him, Wilder. He's pretty shook up."

Wilder turned away and soon found Morrell—and what a sight here! Morrell was unshaven, almost dog-dirty. Without any formality of greeting him Wilder seated himself on a box in front of him.

"Been drunk a week or two, I guess."

"Don't rub it in, Jesse, when a man's down." Morrell's voice was a husky croak. "I had to do that job this morning—"

"I don't want to hear about it, Grant." Wilder's eyes were boring holes through him. "You knew what I thought about you before you sent your sister to me. There are rakes that low along this river, but I've never had one before with guts enough to try that on me. Stay out of my sight. Don't let me catch you in any game of any kind aboard my boat. I'll kill you if I do."

"Then," a wolfish glint filled Grant Morrell's eyes, "you are going to—to see me through?"

"I'm only going to think about it between here and Saint Louis." Wilder arose, started to move away, and then paused. "When I make up my mind either way I'll let you know. But," his eyes blazed, "why should a gambler dicker after he holds the winning hand and has already raked the chips to his side of the table?"

"Listen, Jesse!" Morrell leaped to his feet, not daunted even now by that last wicked insult Wilder had snarled in his face. "You could be a sport. I look pretty down. A shave, a change of—"

"Stand clear, Grant!" Wilder whirled upon him, hell trying to hold itself. "When I have to kill a man I want him to be something of a man, not a buzzard!"

He strode on, out into a wider passageway. Basil Larkinbur fell in beside him.

"Think I'll take a trot along with you," the man gave him a parrot-billed grin, "and step up to see Gracie."

Jesse Wilder did not even trouble to answer him. He simply struck out with a back-handed blow that caught Larkinbur across the mouth. Larkinbur's feet shot forward and up. He struck the deck on the back of his shoulders and neck, landing so hard some of the Texas crowd swore he bounced when he struck. Wilder walked on, unmindful of the roar of laughter behind him.

When he reached the upper deck people at the rail were staring down the river. A white boat had appeared behind the *Rebel*.

It was one of those long, slender things that cut through the water like a knife with a screw propeller. Wilder's eyes narrowed as he watched it. That little gay craft brought back the smouldering memory of his morning's duel, for the boat was the *Sandpiper*, and it belonged among the Lalaurie-Andre crowd.

Somebody was probably going to try to make good the threat Chattanooga Jim had overheard when they were loading the body of Lalaurie back in the coach. His eyes lighted at the thought. For a few moments he got the girl and Grant Morrell off his mind. If the *Sandpiper* would stick with him to only a fair distance beyond St. Joe—then there would be no *Sandpiper* to go back and report!

"Stories By Men Who Know and Love the West!" is the deserved slogan of STAR WESTERN, and Tom Roan, author of this story, well bears it out! You won't want to miss the hell-for-leather novel, "The Clean-Up At Gopher Flats," by this writing ex-bronc-buster and soldier-of-fortune, in the current STAR WESTERN. Buy it—read it—March 5th!

CHAPTER FIVE

Wilder's Woman

THE Lalaurie-Andre crowd had lost no time. They never did, that bunch of high-haired monks and their higher-nosed women. The *Sandpiper* passed the *Rebel* grandly by, almost like a fast river packet overhauling a wheezy old workboat with a string of barges loaded with sand and gravel against her nose.

It looked like a pleasure crowd on the *Sandpiper*. Pleasure crowds were really all the *Sandpiper* had been constructed for. There were women in the lot, daintily sipping brandy or absinth with side-burned young and old dogs around them under gay-colored awnings on the after deck. In short, it looked like the idle rich giving the poor devils a treat by the mere sight of them and what their money and uselessness would buy.

But there was more to it than that to Captain Jesse Wilder's keen eyes. That crowd up forward, now, was a saltier bunch. Women were there, too—but not a dainty sister on the after deck would scuff her heel on a one of them. They belonged to a different set, those women forward, and that "set" would know the art of murder like a school teacher the alphabet. And with the *Sandpiper* reaching St. Louis—or possibly St. Joe—long ahead of the *Rebel*, there would be time for many dark plans.

Wilder turned away when the boat had gone on. Within thirty minutes a poker game was under way at his favorite table in the after starboard corner of the salon. It started slowly but it was the beginning of the fastest, the most reckless game of chance men had seen aboard any boat on the river.

The fury of the game spread all over the boat. People jammed the salon and the decks outside. At times the air was so thick with tobacco smoke it looked as if the salon was afire. Into the salon slipped Texas Bill, fringed buckskins swishing, the giant plowing his way through the crowd like a covered wagon cutting a swath in Kansas prairie grass.

There were no chairs left, but it did not bother Texas Bill. He selected an extra-fat politician—who turned out to be a judge—and promptly took himself a seat on what was left of the man's lap. The man arose in benchly dignity after some difficulty, but he handed down no lofty ruling. He took one look at the giant, and then started belly-pushing his way to the door and the deck, leaving the Texan a chair where he was close to Wilder's table and could keep an eye on the game.

By four o'clock in the afternoon tales fled up and down the boat. Captain Jesse Wilder had lost thirty thousand dollars in cold cash. At eleven o'clock that night he was seventy thousand dollars ahead of the race—and still going strong. He was still going when morning came with a low fog on the river and the doleful blasts of the *Rebel* mourning in the gloom.

It was like that all the way to within a few hours of St. Louis. Wilder had never left the table for more than a couple of hours at a time. When he left, Texas Bill left. When Wilder returned—always looking as fresh as a man who had had hours of sleep, a wash-down and a shave—Texas Bill returned to his chair, watching to see that nothing was going amiss.

A young banker from Chicago ended the game and set the *Rebel* in an uproar by going to his stateroom, locking the door, and blowing out his brains with an old French duelling pistol. He left a note to his bank, pleading forgiveness of his sins for the loss of nearly eighty thousand dollars that did not belong to him.

"Gentlemen," Wilder arose, "out of respect for the gentleman who could not take the pills he was trying to give, the game is closed."

"I don't like this, Wilder!" The exception was taken hotly by a big tobacco-buyer with a whiskey-red nose that looked like the wildcats had clawed it. "I'm seven thousand dollars deep in this game, and suicide or no suicide I think it only fair to give me a chance to get my money back."

"Then you shall have it!" Wilder reached down, riffling the cards. "Seven thousand against the seven you lost on the turn of a card!"

"By damn, you can't bluff me, Jesse Wilder!" cried the man. He reached forward, riffling the cards. They cut, the tobacco-buyer drew the king of hearts.

Jesse Wilder turned the ace of clubs. When he pushed his way out of the cabin the tobacco-buyer had slumped across the table, weeping in his hands.

He went straight to his cabin. He had been brutal enough to Grace Morrell, rarely seeing her, then only for a few minutes at a time. She had come out of it remarkably well, but there was an expression half of grim determination and half of fear as he faced her this morning over the coffee table.

She still wore the same dress she had

come aboard with. A small black valise had come with her—something, he had guessed, that she had been able to snatch up at the last moment. That valise was packed now—with Lord only knew how few poor articles of clothing it might contain—and was standing by a table.

"I am going ashore at Saint Louis, Captain Wilder." She said it over her coffee, in a voice so cool there was not a trace of desperation in it. "All my life I will remember your kindness."

"And what, ma'am," he wanted to know, inwardly feeling a little shock, "will you do in Saint Louis?"

"I don't know." Her hand faltered with the cup on its way to her lips. "Perhaps I can find a place teaching school."

He sat back, brows knitted, studying her. He knew that she did not have a dime, and to let her go in St. Louis would be like throwing a dainty morsel to the wolves. Yet, damn it, it was not his business. It would be the end of Grant aboard—unless officers came after him, anyway, with telegraphed orders from New Orleans for his arrest. Without Grant he could offer her a loan, but there would be that dog to get it some way and gobble it up.

"I think," he scowled, speaking as if the words came without his bidding, "you might find something better in Saint Joe. Besides," he was stumbling for words, "Grant's more likely to be a little safer there."

"Perhaps," she agreed, "but I don't intend to see Grant again in either place, Captain Wilder."

"I once had that hope myself," his voice was hard, "but you see how it is. No!" He held up his hand. "Not because of you. Grant's just one of those men who has but little modesty about coming around where he's not wanted. And you're his sister. He won't let up on you."

HE LEFT her a few minutes later and went on deck, avoiding the salon. Nothing was settled. Hang it, there was something wrong with him. With a man, now, he could get an issue settled in a very few words. But this was something else. Even up on the Texas, his favorite walking place, he could not think. He was afraid of something, like a little boy alone in a dark night on a country road for the first time. Texas Bill came up, and it was a little startling when he found the giant quietly beside him.

"Yo've got things on yore mind, Cap'n Jesse," intoned the Texan. "This time it's somethin' yuh can't charge through on a hoss an' cut with a saber. Yuh can't gamble it out, yuh can't shoot it out. Now if yo've got somebody—let's say aboard—who's troublin' yuh, then I ain't doin' nothin' special. The men with me ain't. It's November, yuh know, an' November's hawg-killin' time down my way. We sorter take special pleasure in gettin' that job off our hands."

"Thanks, Bill," he grimaced, "but I do my own butchering. Besides," he stopped, glowering, "just what are you talking about?"

"In other words," said the giant as they stopped at the stern rail above the big red wheel, "how much do I know? Well, I know what all the whole darned boat knows. Grant Morrell's aboard. So is his sister, a decent gal, an' yo've got 'er in yore cabin while yuh make her brother lie on the cargo deck with the roustabouts below. Oh, they're sayin' plenty, Cap'n Jesse. I wouldn't let Grant Morrell lie in a hawg pen of mine. I just shoot some things in the belly an' let 'em go at that. The last I saw of Grant was at Shiloh. Worthless coward then.

"Don't ask me if I believe all this talk I hear, Cap'n Jesse. I believe only what I see. I don't see the filth in what they're sayin'. Know yuh too well for that. But I do know the gal's in yore cabin, an' I know that damned Grant's below. Know, too, about that Lalaurie boat, an' know there's trouble ahead. If yuh ask me if I'm goin' to stand behind yuh, then I'll knock yuh down. Yuh know I am."

They walked the deck together or stood in low conversation against the rail here and there until the smoke of St. Louis was ahead. When they turned away from the last rail, Wilder headed for his cabin, and Texas Bill headed for the pilot house.

Grace Morrell was ready to leave the boat when Wilder walked in and closed the door behind him. She was drawing on

her gloves, and on her head was the little blue bonnet she had worn aboard. She looked, he thought at once, like a pretty bird that had been long on the wing coming through a storm.

"To your job, Christmas Gift!" he ordered. "Lily Bell will need you for passengers going ashore."

He did not have to tell Chattanooga Jim to get out of the way.

"So you're going?" He looked at the girl up and down, and reached for the brandy decanter and a glass. "After what I said? Why?"

"I think it's best." She had turned her back to him. "You have been very—kind. I can't go on asking favors now. It's all I know to do."

"Yes, I guess that's true." He put the decanter and the glass away without having touched the brandy. "And I'll see you go. In an hour after you're gone it'll be all over town that Jesse Wilder had a woman in his cabin from New Orleans to Saint Louis. That woman's name will be Grace Morrell—'Wilder's woman!' "

"It wouldn't—wouldn't be any different in Saint Joseph." She was crying now. "I'll try to work my way farther West."

"San Francisco wouldn't matter, Grace!" His voice had something husky in it as he walked to her, caught her gently by the shoulders and turned her around. "A steamboat gambler's name such as mine has a long tongue. Stop this!" His arms were around her now, pulling her up, his eyes full of luster as they looked into her streaming eyes. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for his lips to meet her lips. "I can laugh at some women letting the rain come down, but when you cry it goes through me like—like hell!

"I'm a rough-shod man, Grace," he was going on. "Awkward, no doubt, about a lot of things I do. It's like Texas Bill said not long ago. There are some things you can't cut out or shoot out. If it's 'Wilder's woman' they'll have you by tongue, then, by damn, it's Wilder's woman you'll be in the flesh—and even God can't doubt my loyalty to those who are loyal to me!"

"Captain Jesse," her left hand clutched his lapel like a baby's fist, "what is this you're saying to me?"

"I don't know." His laughter trembled. "I'm scared, Grace. By Federal law the captain of a steamboat has the authority to marry a man and a woman. I sent for Captain Lang. He's already rapped on the door. If you tell me you won't marry me—"

He did not have to finish the rest of it. Her hands and arms came on up, encircling his neck, her trembling body clinging to him.

A short time afterwards it was no worse than facing musket balls or making a cavalry charge straight into the teeth of blazing artillery, and he wanted this thing done with no mistake about it. He married her on the broad sweep of open deck aft of the ladies' cabin with passengers jamming every inch of space to stare at them.

Then, when the *Rebel* was warped in against the wharf, he hurried ashore with her, bundled her quickly into a coach, and they were off at a gallop. Hours later—with wagon loads of things coming aboard for the newly married pair—they were back, the bridal and his lady, the best-dressed lady to ever board a steamboat. Then the *Rebel* was underway again.

CHAPTER SIX

Redskins' Wedding Present

TIME dragged now after the *Rebel* left the Mississippi and turned her nose up the Missouri for Kansas City. Arriving at dawn an entire day was lost there, then they were driving ahead for St. Joseph. To the crowds aboard after St. Joseph it was like a race horse turning the marker for the long homeward stretch.

There had been new faces to come aboard at almost every landing, taking the places of some of the passengers that also left the boat at every landing. Some of those faces were grim and wondering, knowing hostile Indian country would lie ahead of St. Joseph. Others were wild and uncaring. Texas Bill Brady studied them all from time to time, grading them like a farmer sorting his grain, and had waited his chance to speak to Wilder.

Texas Bill Brady had seen and heard things he did not like, but he was no

hand to burst in and spoil a man's happiness, even if Wilder was taking a hell of a time about this business of getting used to married life. While Wilder was ashore each time, Brady had kept a close herd on his Texans—all bound for the new buffalo country for the hunt that had opened in ever-growing fury to wipe out the great northern herds. All those buckskin hunters had taken their turns going ashore to visit the various dance hall and drinking dives, and at every landing they had brought back tales of the *Sandpiper* and its crew.

Then there was Grant Morrell and that Larkinbur fellow. Both had gone ashore everywhere. On going ashore, Grant had looked a tramp in St. Louis, and when he returned it had looked to Texas Bill as if somebody rich had married him. For as his sister had returned, so had Grant—new clothes from top to bottom, and two bulging valises and a hat box. A high come-up for a man supposed to be stone-broke.

There was something between Grant and that Larkinbur fellow, and it was not good.

Yet Texas Bill waited, forever hanging about up around pilot house and pacing the Texas, a man scowling behind his red bush of beard while he waited patiently each time for Wilder to show up. And all he could catch of him anywhere was a glimpse now and then, like a man might glimpse a lobo wolf on the hunt.

His chance would come some time, Texas Bill reckoned, but he was continually disappointed. Wilder and his lady had simply dashed ashore here and there, the latter dazzling in her beauty and fine trimmings. At each place they were followed a short time later by Grant and Larkinbur.

Everywhere as before, Grant and Larkinbur were back before Wilder and his wife, Grant each time with another pair of well-stuffed valises and another danged hat box as if he would never get enough. It burned Texas Bill to the marrow when he did not see Wilder to talk to him until they were far up the Missouri River from St. Joseph.

"Yo've been like a clock with the pendulum kinda flung off," he growled when they met in the early moonlight on the Texas and he told Wilder about Grant. "What that means I don't know. Do know, though, that yore Mr. Sharpe sold Larkinbur a stateroom right outa Saint Louis, an' they're ridin' in style—Grant not havin' much trouble keepin' outa *yore* sight. Don't frown! Yuh asked me to watch at all landin's an' see that things stayed right aboard. I did, an' my men picked up what they could along all waterfronts.

"That Lalaurie-Andre boat's still ahead of yuh. Black Peter Lalaurie, uncle of the fella yuh killed with a sword, is aboard 'er. In Saint Louis he was to see a fella called Cache LaVerne, supposed to own a string of tradin' posts up the Missouri, an' damn black at heart, if all said was true. At Saint Joe, he got rid of the last of the wimmin aboard, leavin' 'em to be picked up, I reckon, when he turns back down the rivers. The trouble yuh had in New Orleans is known. In almost ever' town an' landin' where we stop for any time to speak of it's the general talk that yuh picked the wrong crowd to fight with."

"Who did Black Peter go to see in Saint Joe?"

"Fella called Piggy McQuard, pard of some kind to LaVerne. Mean anything to yuh, Cap'n Jesse?"

"An entire family history, yes," Wilder nodded grimly. "Black Peter, Cache LaVerne and Piggy McQuard are partners in one of the damndest fur swindles up and down the rivers. They've made a lot of trouble between honest traders and the Indians."

"Then," frowned the Texan, "I might finish it all. LaVerne an' McQuard are on that boat with Black Peter, up-river somewhere ahead. It was a mighty damned tough mob, I'm told, who pulled out with that boat from Saint Joe."

"We've met tougher ones before, Bill."

"Yeah, I guess so," grinned the Texan, "but there wasn't no counterfeit money in them, Cap'n Jesse."

"What do you mean, Bill?" Wilder caught him by the arm. "Out with it like a man!"

"In Saint Joe, just 'fore yuh got back aboard, two fine-aired government agents come aboard, lookin' for somebody. Grant Morrell an' that Larkinbur fella didn't stick to no stateroom then. They ducked

for the cargo deck an' got mighty dirty hidin' in the hold. My men kept straight faces. Must be mighty dirty down there in the hull, countin' bilge water, drippin's of grease from the engines an' all such muck."

GRIM-LIPPED and tight-faced, Wilder went back to his cabin. Chattanooga Jim read the trouble and took himself out of sight. It was a minute before Grace Wilder read it.

"We made a promise, Jesse." She caught him by the shoulders and faced him squarely. "There will never be a secret that I know and you won't know. There are only two people in the world now. They are Jesse Wilder and his wife. What is it?"

"Grant and Larkinbur are passing counterfeit money." He was watching her face, but not an eyebrow faltered.

"You've called me a clinging vine, Jesse." She pushed him into a chair and seated herself on his lap. "I am. When a girl faces want and terrible realities, then she is bound to cling to her one last possession. You say hard men like that kind. Grant literally tried to sell me, body and soul, to you in New Orleans. You were too fine a man for such a beastly thing. But, Jesse, you can't save the house after it has burned to the ground. Grant is that house. I don't hate him. I just don't know this Grant Morrell any more, Jesse."

"More and more, Grace," he held her tightly, voice low and lip against her ear, "I see my crying need of you. I'm already beginning to lean on you. There's a great land ahead of us. I have a great woman beside me. She will never know want. I promise you that. And there is only one way for a gambling man to assure that promise. I am a rich gambling man now. Gamblers rarely stay rich—if they keep on. For your sake and mine I'll never riffle or toss another card. We're going to make ourselves a credit to Montana."

It was at eleven o'clock, two mornings later, when the *Rebel* blew for what at first looked like a passenger on the north bank of the river. There was no landing here, and curious eyes strained. A lone horseman was ahead, sitting hunched forward in his saddle. The man and his black horse had their heads down. The horse's feet were spread like stilts, the animal's muzzle resting on a stone, a lean, sad brute at the end of his run.

The *Rebel* ground her bow gently on the gradual slope of the graveled bank. With his wife watching from a window high above him, Wilder, Texas Bill and a dozen others trotted down a light gangplank that had been run out for them. As they walked to the man and horse their hands lifted, their hats coming off solemnly.

"Indian scout, Cap'n Jesse," whispered the Texan. "Look at that arrow in his back. Driv' almost through 'im."

The man was dead in the saddle. Down his buckskin shirt the blood had dried. His great hat was clutched tightly to his head. In a last death grip his hands were on the broad saddle horn, locked there in a cold spasm a man would have to break.

In the horse's left side were two arrows just behind the rider's knee. One of them was driven almost to the feathers on its shaft. Yet the horse was still alive. He lifted his head, glazed eyes to look, muzzle twitching as if trying to scent friend or foe. A whimper as low as a whisper came from the animal. A moment later a big Colt thundered in Texas Bill's right hand and mercifully sent a bullet through the suffering animal's brain.

"Lord!" screamed a woman high up and forward on the Texas. "Look! The poor thing still stands. It stands! *Wheee-ee, catch me, Jasper, I'm going to faint!*"

"Take the body of the man down," ordered Wilder, "then push the horse over."

They got the dead man down and carried the body aboard. Wilder and Texas Bill went through the saddle pockets, looking for papers. Because his stiff legs were outthrust like pegs driven in the ground it took four men to push the horse over, and everybody scrambled back aboard as if the spot had been cursed by the devil.

"You'll see sights like that all along from now on, Grace," warned Wilder when he returned to his cabin an hour later. "The reds are making trouble from here to the Big Horn. They can leave

some damned horrible examples at times."

"Yes, Jesse, I know, but—but come," her voice choked for just an instant. "Your food is getting cold."

A sharp *ping!* and a half-hearted splattering of glass from a starboard window seemed to answer her. They glanced at the window where a round, milky-looking hole had appeared, left there by a near-spent bullet from a distant knoll.

"Look, Jesse." Grace Wilder dipped a spoon in her coffee. In it was the spent bullet. "We'll keep this as—as—"

"A wedding present from Montana!" He laughed. Then a heavy buffalo rifle churned somewhere on deck to answer the shot. "The reds are always taking cracks at boats going up or down the river. Where's the sugar, Jim?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stockade Treachery

IF TROUBLE was going to come it would be at Fort Round Rock, the southernmost trading post on the river of the Lalaurie, LaVerne & McQuard combine. If the *Sandpiper* was waiting for him—and Jesse Wilder had no doubt that she was—she could lie behind the tall shoulder of cliffs on the western bank of the river. And if a fight started between a steamboat and the fort it would not be the first time Fort Round Rock's two old three-pounder Russian guns had gone into action in "self defense."

In order to keep the record straight, Wilder told his wife about it at the breakfast table when the day came that was to see them due to pass the fort at sundown. She took it calmly, far more calmly than he had hoped for her to take it.

"What comes will come," she answered. "What happens to me will happen to you."

"It's a chance they've been waiting for," he told her. "They've tried to hog the whole country up here. They know that I'm opening a string of posts of my own. They know that my boat is mostly loaded with supplies for those posts, Grace, and it doesn't set well. That's really why M. Denis crowded me in New Orleans for an excuse to slap my face in front of everybody and his dog in the Absinthe House. He thought he would finish me or I'd only rake him with a rapier, and the fat would be in the fire. Martyr to his uncle's cause, we might say. Jim," he held up his hand. "Find Texas Bill and bring him in here—if you have to get help to drag him."

He was prepared, come what would. On the cargo deck, kept out of sight in the forward storeroom, was a little surprise the *Rebel* had been carrying for three years now—just in case Fort Round Rock got the notion some time that the *Rebel* and its owner was offering too stiff competition. No man was going to run Jesse Wilder's boat off the river!

Texas Bill came in a few minutes, looking awkward and afraid of pushing over something. Hat off, he bowed so low his long hair almost swept the floor.

"Pleezed to meetcha, ma'am."

"Sit down, Bill," ordered Wilder, pulling up a chair for him. "Grace hasn't bit me yet."

"No, Bill," his wife laughed, "I cut and shoot them. Jesse's told me all about you."

"*All,* ma'am?" Brady's eyes widened. "Well, it ain't true." He dropped his hat behind him and eased himself into a chair as if afraid of breaking it with his weight, and then looked at the big hands on his lap as if he wondered what he was going to do with them. "I'm a God-fearin' man—mostly, ma'am."

"Shake, Bill!" Grace Wilder thrust

WHEN BILL COMES BACK. . . . Yes, we'll have sort of a choked-up throat when we see that soldier swing off the train—home to stay, this time! But meanwhile, let's make sure he *does* come back—he and thousands of other Bills—by giving them the best fighting equipment of any army in the world! War Savings Bonds help buy the tools to win the war. Let's give more than the 10%! Bill needs it—right now!

out her hand. "I'm not easily scared. Come on and have some coffee. Jesse wants to talk to you about Fort Round Rock."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The giant's hand swallowed her hand. "Cap'n Jesse, I'm damned if she don't smell true blue right off!"

"Cap'n Jesse!" It was ten or fifteen minutes later that Chattanooga Jim seized Wilder by the shoulder in a terrified grip. "Lord—Lawd! Look a-yondah at them red mens a-b'ilin'!"

The *Rebel's* whistle started a frantic bellowing. Texas Bill flung from his chair, seized his hat, and was gone like a charging bull to the door. As he snatched open the door the screams of women and the yells of startled men came in, filling the cabin like a storm. With that sound came a splattering volley of shots that grew into a bedlam from the high banks at either side of the river. Glass shattered all over Wilder's cabin.

"Move, Grace," he shouted. "Under something, quick!"

"I can't, Jesse." Even through tears of pain she tried to smile at him. "I'm shot. . . ."

"No damn Indian's leadin' this!" Down on the lower deck, Texas Bill and his men were already into it with their heavy buffalo rifles. Above their heads in the cabins women still screamed, men bawling harsh oaths and getting out their rifles. "A white man's runnin' this show. One look tells me that!"

"Look out, pilot house, damnit you're going aground! Look out pilot house! *Look out!* Stop the engines, damn it! They must be all dead in the pilot house!"

Clouds of riders that seemed to be flying were on the riverbanks. It was an ideal place to ambush a boat, and there seemed to be a thousand Indians up there. Before the engines could be stopped there was a grating sound up front, a staggering shiver that traveled all over the boat, and then the *Rebel* was aground on a sandbar and at the mercy of the flying horsemen above. A hoarse voice started yelling in the cabins:

"Keep the women down! Keep the women down! Look, ma'am, you're only running out there right into the bullets. Catch her, you damned fool! Damn it, I told you to catch 'er! Now she's shot full of holes!"

"The Texas for Texans!" Brady's wild voice came mushrooming up out of the din. "Up where yuh can smell the smoke an' the hair aburnin'! Up, Texans, yuh long-haired sidewinders, an' let 'em hear yore rattle. Never mind him, damn it, he's dead!"

"GO, JESSE, go. Do what you can." She was smiling at him as he laid her on the floor between two long, heavy chests Chattanooga Jim had helped him draw up at either side to shield her. "I hear somebody crying that the boat's aground."

"Lily Bell's heah, Cap'n Jesse!" cried Chattanoga Jim, voice a sob. "Lily Bell's heah!"

"Lily Bell, God bless you!" cried Wilder. "Keep down. Do what you can for her. Here, Jim, let's up end that desk. That's it! Keep piling up anything that comes to hand and get behind it. Goodbye, honey." He dropped to his knees and kissed his wife, a moan of horror coming from him when he saw the patch of blood widening on her breast. "I'm going now, baby!"

Brady's men were on the Texas when he reached it, but they were inside the little cabins there, down behind benches and chests, manfully firing way. In a hail of bullets that seemed to be slashing from both sides of the river, he reached the pilot house, flung open the door and flung inside.

Captain Lang, Pat Monahan and the man who had been at the wheel were down with Lang cursing and holding his bloody head. From the shattered windows and the bullet holes all around it was a certainty that the pilot house had been the object of the first concentrated blasts of firing.

Wilder seized the whistle cord, drawing one long blow from the whistle that caused some commotion among the ponies on the riverbanks, then he was jerking on the cord to the bells in the engine room. *One! Two! Three! Back up, down there!*

After a few moments he felt the engines responding.

Now the time of real danger was at hand. For two long minutes the *Rebel* refused to budge an inch, and then Wilder felt her move. At times he was blinded by the flying splinters as hail after hail of lead rained on the pilot house. They would try that—put out the pilot house and let the boat go to hell, damn them! But the *Rebel* was moving. A wild cheering lifted from the decks below. Wilder had to stand fully erect by this time, a man madly fighting with the wheel, spinning it first one way and then another to keep her from going aground astern—and he was not the best pilot on the Missouri by a long shot!

Another wild burst of cheering lifted from below. Through the hails of lead and smoke the *Rebel* was clearing. Yard by yard, it seemed, the boat kept going, gradually creeping back out of the danger zone. When the last high bank was dropping away Captain Lang stumbled to his feet, both hands gripping his bloody head.

"Keep down!" Wilder gave him a push with his foot. "'It's safer there, you old fool!"

"God don't make bigger fools than you, Jesse!" cried the old man in an unreal voice. "Who the hell do you think you are, anyway? Standin' up there chewin' bullets an' tryin' to run a steamboat. Why, you couldn't paddle a skiff on a summer millpond!"

Clear water was ahead now, wide and smooth where the *Rebel* could lie and every rifleman aboard could turn the full fury of his rifle on gradual slopes at either side of the river. By the time the safe water was reached Lang had a rag tied around his head. Wilder turned the wheel over to him and hurried back below to find that Lily Bell had shifted his wife to the big berth.

"Sho' she's all right, Cap'n Jesse!" cried the woman. "Through de shouldah, cleaner'n a brand-new coffee pot's spout. Jes' a little blood, ain't it, honey?"

"Yes, Lily Bell." Grace Wilder smiled. "I'm all right, Jesse."

"Sho' is, honey!" Lily Bell's laughter filled the cabin with the shots below gradually dying away. "Now Cap'n Jesse knows what's the colah of yo' blood, honey, an' won't have to go beatin' you up to find out!"

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And then another spasm of Lily Bell's laughter filled the cabin.

"They pulled off, Cap'n Jesse, but we ain't lettin' 'em stay waddled up in the distance on either side of us like that."

Texas Bill Brady knew the secret of the store room. He had opened it to get to Wilder's one piece of light field artillery. The gun had already been run out on the forward deck and blocks were being spiked down to hold it in place when it was fired.

"Look up the river!" Somebody yelled that from above. "A boat's coming and the Indians are letting it through!"

Oh, yes, the Indians would let that boat through! It was the *Sandpiper,* and even as it came in sight Wilder knew that one of the old Russian cannons from the fort had been transferred to the boat. There was a puff of smoke, a crash of glass and wreckage on the cabin deck to throw everything into confusion up there and start the screaming and yelling all over again.

The *Sandpiper* might have remained in New Orleans. She did fire a second shot. One of the *Rebel's* funnels came down with a resounding crash that brought a faint, far cheer from the *Sandpiper's* decks, but it was the *Sandpiper's* last shot and her last cheer. The gun on the *Rebel* blazed, sending a tremble from one end of the boat to the other.

"Right betwixt the eyeballs!" bellowed Texas Bill. "That's sightin' a piece an' shootin' 'er, Cap'n Jesse!"

It was the *Rebel's* turn to cheer. The *Sandpiper* had received the cannonball squarely on the nose. Men working desperately around her old gun to load and fire again simply disappeared. Bits of wood and flying wreckage filled the air over the boat now, but Wilder was not yet through. He sent a second and a third ball into what was left of the wreck just to make sure, then turned the gun over to Texas Bill.

"Clear the riverbanks now, Bill," he ordered. "We started for the mouth of the Yellowstone, and, by heaven, we're going through!"

Monahan had been carried back into his cabin when Wilder returned to the pilot house. That Irishman was not yet a goner, though he had an ugly wound in the chest that was being patched up by a lanky Texan. The poor devil who had been at the wheel was dead.

"I'm all right now, yes." Captain Lang nodded as the roar of the field piece scattered the last huddled swarm of Indians

"I'll drive 'er through, have no fear of that!"

"Drive her!" ordered Wilder, and went back below to be plucked on the sleeve by Mr. Sharpe and drawn to one side.

"Mr. Morrell and Mr. Larkinbur didn't fare so well, sir. That first cannonball side-slapped their stateroom. They're dead, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Sharpe," said Wilder. "Carry on with your duties. We're going to make another run for it."

"We're going through, Grace." Back in the cabin when the *Rebel* was forging ahead again he stood there looking down at her. "It won't be so tough this time, honey."

"All right, Jesse." She smiled up at him. "Am I doing all right?"

"You're going great guns, my darling!"

Shots were crashing again a few minutes later, but the sting was taken out of them. From the Texas to the cargo deck rifles of every make raked the tops of the banks in a deadly rain of lead, making it certain suicide for any line of riders to come in sight. They passed the wreck of the *Sandpiper,* bursts of rifle fire raking it, and then swept grandly on with the bannering woodsmoke pouring from the *Rebel's* one good stack.

Fort Round Rock came at sundown with one cannon left to bristle from the cliffs. Jesse Wilder and Texas Bill Brady again sighted the gun on the *Rebel's* forward deck. Out of range of the fort's gun the *Rebel* came to a halt. Two shots from her gun turned the cliffs to dust where the Russian cannon had stood. Then giving the distracted men of the fort two long blows from her whistle, the *Rebel* pushed on, under the cliffs and around the bend, clear now of all the danger zones.

When her wound healed—and not a minute before—Captain Jesse Wilder would tell his wife about Grant.

THE END

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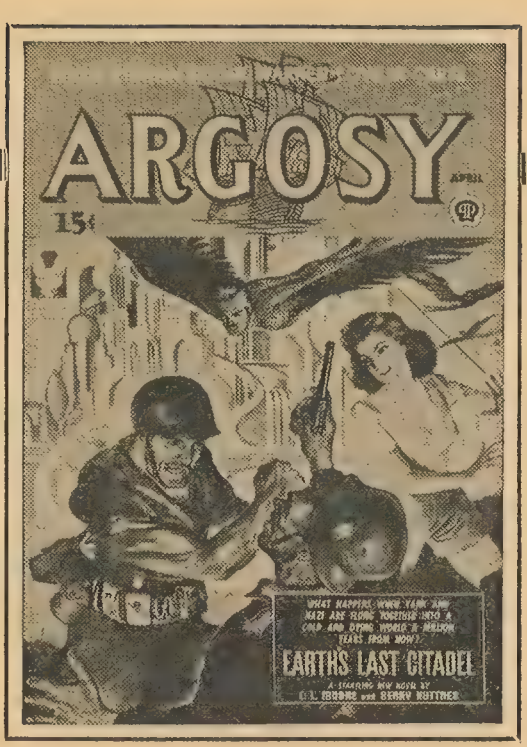

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BROTHERHOOD OF BATTLE

By STEVE HERRINGTON

Ed shot the herder out of his saddle . . .

Ed Dushane, Texan, gambled his life at the camp of Pancho Villa, to learn that even such a ragged piasano army might march, fight and die — to win a people's peace, at the end of a people's war!

AN HOUR after sunset, Ed Dushane moved from his hiding-place and again approached the outpost. His first nervousness was still strong in him. Any way he could figure, he was a damned fool. The packet of papers, jewels, manuscripts, and the three little caskets which the old man had rolled in oiled silk and wrapped around his waist felt heavy and awkward. Maquina was only a dozen miles behind him. He had a hundred to go to reach the Border. And the unknown strength of Villa's sprawling army was spread out in front of him.

Working up a light cut made by spring

rains in the face of the ridge, Ed crawled within five yards of the sentry in the outpost. The sentry seemed to have been changed since he'd made his last effort to top the ridge an hour ago.

The new man had apparently eaten heavily before he came on duty. He was resting back against the edge of the cut, his legs out in front of him and his rifle carelessly across his lap. Like the troop that had ridden into the great *hacienda* out of Maquina, the man was strongly marked with Yaqui blood—a heavy, solid, emotionless figure marked by a slow and cruel impression of strength.

Dushane was into the swing of his first stride toward the man before the sentry saw him. He doubled his legs under him, came awkwardly to his knees, and tried to swing the rifle. Ed had meant to make it quick and silent, nothing more. But seeing this clay-like face and the sullen eyes, he thought of how the old man had died in front of his hacienda, and he swung his pistol-barrel with twice the force necessary.

The sentry's skull crumpled under the blow with the same ugly sound as had the old man's. The Yaqui fell forward with a quick sigh and lay motionless. Dushane picked up his rifle hopefully, then dropped it when he saw that it was a French piece, worthless the day it was made, and worse than worthless now, after months of the untrained care it had received in the army of Pancho Villa.

Topping the ridge and feeling a little more secure that the sentry wouldn't have a clear shot at him all the way down, Dushane dropped toward the valley floor where he had seen horses tethered before darkness fell. He moved rapidly, driven on by his anger at himself. A cattle-buyer from Texas has no business being noble. He knew that. A cattle-buyer makes a living from making a profit on beef. There was no profit in this wild scramble he was on.

IT HAD all started when he came into Don Santiago Soltierra's rancho on his annual trip to buy in a few head of Soltierria's famous blooded stock for the northern market. He had ridden through many companies of Villa's ranging horde on the trip down. But Villa was not taken seriously north of the Border. The wastes of Chihuahua had always had their bandits, and one more couldn't amount to much.

He had not attached much importance to the presence of the raiders around Maquina until he had gotten to Soltierra's hacienda and found it fortified. He had begun to understand when he saw that the huge staff of servants and vaqueros usually swarming the rancho were gone—that only half a dozen of the oldest of them had stayed. The old man—Soltierra himself—had made the rest of it plain to him.

"I am an *hidalgo,* Señor Dushane," the old man said sadly. "Not for the way I personally have lived, but for the way my fathers and theirs before them lived for ten generations, I am to be punished. There is a great dream in the heart of this rough *bandido* from the hills. A dream of a new Mexico. I know it well, for it has been my dream, too. Villa must keep the hearts of his men up, and because their hearts have been bowed down for many years, this takes strong medicine. Villa must show them they are winning a new way of life in Mexico by letting them destroy the old, piece by piece, with their own hands. My turn has come."

There had been no bitterness in the old man's voice. Only a wisdom Ed Dushane could not understand. He had tried to fire the old man with a will to fight off the rabble horde squeezing in against his gates. But Soltierra shook his head.

"You are a Yanqui, Señor. You will not be troubled so much as one of us. And there are things on this rancho which must be sent out to the States. They must be sent to the Mexican consul at El Paso to be kept until the revolution is over. They are things which are a part of Mexico's history and which, when her mind is cool, she will want to have. You have been a friend to me. You wish to help. This you can do by taking these mementos and these papers north for me."

Ed had taken the papers, taken the parcel the old man bundled up and wrapped it around him under his shirt. But he had not gone until Soltierra was dead. He had crouched behind a gun at the corrals, triggering into the horde which poured

into the compound of the rancho until he saw its uselessness. He had seen the old *haciendado* walk slowly from his house, out to face the sullen-visaged wolves who had come to pull down what he had taken a lifetime to build. He had seen the house looted and fired, had watched the Soltierra's face, which held steady even to the moment when an impatient *carabinero* smashed ruthlessly downward with the butt of his rifle and crushed the old man's skull.

He had started out, then, afoot, since he didn't dare ride free of the rancho on a horse. And he'd made time until he hit this ridge and Villa's far-flung sentry line.

Through the line, now, he wanted a horse. Once in the saddle, he'd ride. He'd ride north. Santiago Soltierra was a fool to die without fighting. These men weren't Mexicans—they were wolves! And he was a fool to carry a sheaf of yellowed deeds, a packet of recordings of grants and laws, and the sacred, time-mellowed ornaments from the altar of the Cathedral of Maquina north through their keening pack.

He should cache them—hide them deep somewhere. Then he should double south. There was a federal army down there, an army which would be grateful for revenge-bent Texans who hated Villa's rabble. He should fight until Chihuahua was clear again. But he couldn't.

"Keep these things with you, even if you die," old Soltierra had warned earnestly. "It is better that they fall into the hands of the *revolucionarios* than that they be lost. If you hid them, thinking to come back, and then were killed, no man would know where they are. And some things from the old days must be saved to give the new something to fight for!"

He had made a promise. He crawled on down the ridge, swearing at himself, but grimly intending to keep that promise in spite of a blood-fired *paisano* army and its wily, renegade chief.

The pitch of the ridge increased as it dropped into the valley. Dushane stumbled heavily twice in the darkness, his big body crashing noisily in the underbrush. Both time he lay minutes without moving, waiting to see if the sound had carried among the renegades. But no sound came up from below.

The second time he began to feel uneasy, wondering if Villa's men had moved the horses after it had grown dark. A little later he was relieved to hear the muted sounds a horse-cavvy makes at night. It was a little to the left of him, and he changed his direction to bear on the edge of the herd.

Half an hour after he'd passed the sentry on the ridge, the slope of the hill leveled off under his feet, and he came to the fringe of the brush. In front of him was a grassy little park in which two or three hundred saddle-horses were bunched. He grinned and picked out one which had the long-legged look of a Pecos pacer. Spotting the night-herder on the far side of the bunch, riding head-down in a lazy circle, he cut out boldly across the open toward the herd.

He had not gone fifty yards before a voice chuckled softly.

"You have good ears, Sintoro," the voice said. "There was a man on the ridge. And I think he wants a horse!"

With the words, five or six men raised out of the grass almost under Ed's feet. He would have reached for his gun, but the tall man who had spoken crossed his carbine in front of him with an incredibly swift chop, rapping its butt against Ed's forearm with agonizing solidness.

"Careful, Yanqui!" the man spat. He turned a little and Ed caught a gleam of starlight across his death's head of a face. This was Latilla, Villa's chief lieutenant. Latilla the Butcher. The man's face split in a smile and Ed saw that though Latilla was young, some horrible accident or disease had swept the man's mouth empty of teeth.

"I think Pancho is already asleep," Latilla said thoughtfully. "He wants to see all prisoners. But if he sleeps, *pues*, we cannot keep a Yaqui prisoner all night! Go into the camp, Sintoro. If he sleeps, come back. We will wait here."

The man called Sintoro broke from the dark shadows of the group and started off up the valley at a brisk trot. Latilla squatted down on his heels, eyeing his prisoner tauntingly. He made no attempt to disarm Ed, but he kept his carbine at a ready angle. It was plain enough he would welcome a break on his prisoner's part.

Ed was desperate. The rest of the little

party drifted away. One went around the herd toward the night-rider. Two of them sprawled again in the grass, apparently to resume the sleep from which they had been roused. The remaining man went back into the brush at the foot of the ridge on some errand of his own. Dushane's anger, already virulent after the scene at the Soltierra rancho, crept steadily to new heights. This insolent disregard of him was a hard thing for a Texan to take.

His mind began working at the situation, fighting to make something of it, if only to show Latilla a Texan was not a helpless blueblood of his own race to be toyed with at leisure and butchered when the game grew tiring. Latilla seemed to understand his thoughts. He shifted his carbine suggestively in warning and chuckled again.

Moments passed. Ed knew that the odds against him would be impossible if he didn't break before Sintoro came back from the main camp—either with Villa in person, or with word that Villa slept. If Villa was awake, he would be questioned, searched, his death delayed for some time. If Villa slept, Latilla's carbine would cut him down and a dead prisoner would be shown to the chief in the morning. That ready carbine seemed to be Ed's only hope.

Waiting until Latilla had been looking at him steadily for some time and was about ready to shift his eyes Ed flung himself, not at the man, but at his gun. Latilla shifted the weapon with a lightning jerk. Ed sprawled across the weapon, sick with the fear he'd gauged wrong and was masking the muzzle with his body. The weapon fired, burning a sear of pain across Ed's taut belly muscles just above the thick roll of the packet around his waist.

Then he had his own side-gun free and he fired into the gape-mouthed, twisted face in front of him. Latilla jerked back, clawed to his feet, and reached for his own belt-gun. But he was dead where he stood, and he fell loosely before his fingers were tight about the weapon.

The two *revolucionarios* who had stretched out in the grass reared up. One of them got away a shot, sending a slug tearing into Latilla's falling body in the confusion of the moment. Dushane fired twice with careful steadiness, picking off the two. Then he hooked up Latilla's carbine, a good weapon, wholly unlike the clumsy rifle he had left with the sentry on top of the ridge.

He had to make this complete and fast to make it work. His first shot went a little wide. The horse-herd doubled nervously with the firing and blanketed the night-herder and the man who had crossed to join him for a moment. Then the herd opened again and Ed took the herder out of his saddle. But the man on foot ducked behind the herder's horse, started the animal moving, and ran along behind the shelter of its body.

A shot came out of the brush at Ed's back. He wheeled, caught the man who had gone in there in a dive between two shelters, and spilled him limply in the rubble.

Carrying the carbine and hampered by the clumsy packet under his shirt, Ed loped across the meadow toward the horses. They shied excitedly away from him. He kept his eye on the long-legged animal he had picked out in the first place, and managed to snag a hand into the horse's mane. For thirty seconds he had his fight with the animal, but a Texan can talk to a Pecos brute, and he went up onto the horse and set his knees.

He made no attempt to control his mount—a nearly impossible thing without a bridle, halter, or hackamore, but let the big horse run its nervousness out in a flat, humping drive up the canyon.

As they hammered out of the upper end of the meadow, he heard shots across the open and saw a party of seven or eight riders plow in among the milling herd. But he knew that by the time they had cut through the cavvy and picked up his trail, his lead would be good enough to give him a breather, at least. And if he could get a saddle and bridle somewhere in the morning, he was as good as in El Paso, now.

DUSHANE, however, did not consider two things. One was the kind of trail he rode in the blackness at the bottom of the canyon. And the other was the size of Villa's army or the amount of territory it covered when encamped.

He had been hammering up the valley long enough for his horse to blow out its first burst of speed—he judged about four or five miles—when he came driving around a sharp bend of the trail and rode almost full into a fire. Beyond the fire were several ragged tents, and beyond them, another horse cavvy.

He put knee and hand pressure against the neck of his horse and the animal turned obediently up the slope toward the haven of thick timber. Below him, five or six men flung almost instantly onto the backs of mounts kept saddled by the tents. Even then, nursing his anger at the Villistas, Dushane thought he might dodge them in the darkness and keep clear, continuing with the relics to safety.

But as he looked behind him to measure the speed of his pursuit, his horse cut suddenly to one side and went under an old piñon whose lower branches cleared the animal's neck but not its rider.

The fires of a quick and blinding hell exploded in the back of Ed Dushane's head. He felt himself driven back over the tail of his horse. He felt the world wheel as he fell. He squirmed desperately to land on his feet and to stagger on. But his legs were rubber and he went heavily onto his face. . . .

When Dushane roused dazedly, he was huddled under a heavy guard with half a dozen other dishevelled, fearful-eyed men. Two of them were men from north of the Border, like himself. Two or three more were *hidalgos,* dressed in the same expensive velvet and broadcloth and fine leather which old Santiago Soltierra had worn to his death. The remaining pair were *paisanos,* sullen-faced, Indian-blooded men of Chihuahua's barren soil.

Running his eyes along the silhouette of the ridge above the camp in which he was now held, Dushane judged that he had been carried back down the valley, across the meadow, and into the main camp, from which Latilla and his men had come out to watch the first horse herd he had struck.

Studying the sprawling camp through eyes which still ached from the blow he had taken on the back of his head, a new realization swept Dushane. Two things a Texan understands — cow-business and making war.

There was no cow-business in this camp. Possibly many of the men thronging it had been *vaqueros* on great ranches like the Soltierra empire at Maquina. But the majority of them were laborers, farmers and the slaves of wealthier farmers. Their hands were bent to the handle of the *arado*—the ox-bow plow of Mexico—not to reins and riata.

But there was much sign of the making of war. This was no bandit crew's camp. Without any mark of orderliness, there was over the whole encampment an air of organization and singleness of purpose which made order unnecessary.

Paisano, mestizo, peon—these men were all soldiers, soldiers of Villa—soldiers of Mexico. There was a little laughter among them, a snatch of song. But through even these things ran the strong current of their earnestness. Dushane had thought old Soltierra was a fool when he talked of a dream of a new nation south of the Border living in the hearts of farm hands and a bandit chieftain. He could feel the dream—savage and irresistible, in this camp. And it flung a coldness through him.

Mexico had been a pleasant place with the gracious *haciendas* waiting to welcome strangers at the end of each day's ride, with the lovely, time-mellowed walls of the cathedrals rising above the sprawling 'dobe of the towns, and with an air of antiquity which was a welcome change from the rawness of the great new nation to the north, hanging over the whole land like the dust, itself.

But this army would destroy all of that. And here in the wastes of Chihuahua was being born a beast of a nation—ruled by men whose lust for revenge had been nursed for a dozen generations. Ruled by men without hearts or feeling—men like Francisco Villa.

Villa was holding a loose kind of court fifty paces across the open in the center of the camp. He sat on a saddle on the ground, his thick, powerful legs thrust straight out before him. A heavy weariness pulled at the lines of his wind-cured face so that they sagged like those of an old man. And he seemed to take little interest in the proceedings before him. His mind seemed far away, perhaps at Santa Rosalia, where he must presently go; per-

haps at the distant Cuidad Mejico, itself.

A squat little man with the quick, electric movements of a cat, brought up the prisoners one by one. He spoke quickly, naming the charges against them, waited for Villa's nod, and then tolled off two or three men to each as executioners. This was, Ed Dushane judged, Fiero, the Terrible, bodyguard, companion, and rumored to be the one man whom Villa trusted with his friendship.

The *hidalgos* were charged with oppression of their people. They made no defense. Looking at their faces and seeing only hardness—none of the gentle kindliness of old Soltierra—Dushane knew the pair had no defense. They were, in fact, what Fiero named them to be—slavers and butchers. And Dushane began to see that there was some justice in the rising up of this army out of the desert, that there was a grim kind of justice in this court held by Pancho Villa and administered by the terrible Fiero.

The two North Americans—Fiero made the word *norteamericano* vibrate with bitter scorn—had hired themselves out to the troops of the *federales*. Fiero stood this pair belly to back and cut them down himself with one shot which went cleanly through both bodies. The ragged crowd around the court cried approval. The *paisanos* were traitors to their own blood, men who had sold information about the *Villistas* to the federal army. These were permitted to run for freedom through the fires, and a score of guns struck at them as they ran so that they died between one stride and the next.

And presently the guards came for the last prisoner. Ed Dushane came to his feet and walked steadily toward Villa. For the first time the bandit chief seemed to take an interest.

He leaned forward a little. Dushane felt jet eyes in which an incongruous light of wisdom burned steadily, knife into him. Fiero stood beside his master, holding outspread across his hands the clumsily-wrapped belt which held the plunder old Soltierra had tried to send north from Maquina.

For a moment, looking again at the treasures the old man had stored in the oiled wrappings, Dushane felt he had failed in a trust. But he remembered the old man's warning that it was better that these things fell into the hands of the *revolucionarios* than that they be lost altogether.

"This one is a Yankee thief!" Fiero said savagely. "Here is his plunder."

Villa's glance flickered toward the makeshift belt, then back to Dushane.

"Also this one is a murderer," Fiero went on. "Latilla and four others are dead at his hands!"

Fiero stopped and watched his *jéfe* expectantly, waiting for the nod which signified summary execution. Dushane waited, too.

There was no clemency in this court. And there was no escape, now. He wasn't a man to these devils. He was only a heap of flesh which had crossed them in their purpose. They needed blood to keep the black fires of their courage high. They would spill his blood as they spilled the blood of thousands.

But Villa didn't nod. He looked at Ed a long time. Finally he hoisted himself to his feet with a grunt and lifted the makeshift belt from Fiero's hands.

"I'll talk to this one, amigo," he said quietly. "I'll talk to him a long time. I want no one coming to my tent till I'm finished!"

Fiero scowled blackly and opened his mouth as though to protest. Villa wheeled on him, the terrible lash of the man's temper surfacing.

"Andale!" he roared. Fiero shrugged and turned away. The crowd which had been pressed up to the informal court

WHILE HITLER LAUGHS!

"They machine-gunned the boats after our tanker sunk. . . . I came up in a sea of blazing oil; my lungs were bursting, but I managed to make it underwater to a clear place. . . . I tried to reach the bos'n, but he went down. . . ." That's when you realize that taxes aren't enough—when you want to top that 10% quota, and—BUY *MORE* U. S. WAR-SAVINGS BONDS!

began to break into groups and to move off into the rest of the camp. Villa jerked his head at Dushane, waited until Ed had passed in front of him, and then moved behind him toward the big, dirty tent which had once been a headquarters top for the U. S. Army until discarded.

INSIDE, Villa dropped the entrance-flap, slid off the bandoliers of carbine shells which he wore across his shoulders, and dropped onto an up-ended box beside a scarred little table. He put old Soltierra's belt of treasures down on the table and unfolded it to look at its contents. The written matter—the papers and old documents—he barely glanced at, only enough to know what they were. But he looked a long time at the mellow gold and exquisite carved ivory and ebony of the sacred artifacts from the church altar.

"From Maquina," he said softly. "I was worried about these, señor. My little wolves have hungry hands. And they lie, even to me, when they are sure they can't be caught! It's good to see that there was nothing in the cathedral but gilt when they reached it. Where did you get these?"

Ed Dushane answered him flatly. "You heard Fiero," he snapped. "I stole them!"

A sly grin crossed Villa's face. *"Seguro,"* he agreed. "Of course you did. I had forgotten. It makes Fiero angry, this forgetting of mine!" He laughed shortly. "And Fiero said it was you who killed Latilla. I remember that. You didn't like Latilla, señor?"

Ed was uneasy that the Wolf of the Cholla was in a joking mood. He had heard some of the jokes the *Villista* had played on their prisoners. But he held himself tight and silent. The bandit chief shook his head.

"Fiero is death. He was born with death in his heart. But not Latilla. Latilla was a good man until he had a boy's fight with the son of the *haciendado* on which he lived. It was a fierce fight and Latilla bit the hand of the other boy. His teeth were pulled for that, one by one with nail-tongs from the blacksmith shop of the *hacienda*. Not a good thing for a boy to feel. Not a good thing for a man to remember when he marches with his brothers to make a new Mexico out of the cold heart of the old. I miss Latilla. But maybe it is good he is gone. There is too much of hatred in my army, *Tejano*."

The master of the *Villista* began replacing Soltierra's treasures, refolding the makeshift belt into a tight parcel a man could again wrap around his waist under his shirt. When he spoke again, it was with a queer softness which matched the melancholy in his eyes.

"Santiago Soltierra was a good man, señor. His was one *hacienda* to which I could not ride with my men. He did not fight them back. I knew he would not. He was a man of wisdom. He knew the problems of a man who leads an army from the fields against the cruelty of their masters. He knew that the good and the bad must go together to make room for a new beginning. It is like Santiago that he would think, even in his last hour, of the laws and the records and the precious trappings of the ancient altar at Maquina. It is a sad thing that his messenger was caught. You were to take them north to the consul at El Paso."

Dushane nodded.

"Villa rides the fastest horse in his camp, señor. That horse is kept always ready saddled behind Villa's tent. A pity you can't escape us now, eh? Soon I must call Fiero back to take you away. But first, señor, look—!"

With strong, squared hands, this strange leader of the strangest army in the world tore open the front of his own shirt and pulled out a long packet much like the one Ed had worn. Spreading it on the table, Villa unfolded it. More yellowed documents lay within. More little caskets in which churches in the desert country store their most valuable and sacred articles, more gold and jade and ivory and ebony.

"From Rosario and La Tena and Montana and Durroque," Villa said softly, touching a finger on each. "My little brothers do not know that these things are nothing in themselves, but that they are symbols of what Mexico has been and what she may be, under the Grace of God. They see only the gold and the ivory. They don't see that these are the things men remember when they are old—that these are signs of what we are fighting for

—a country for us all under the same warm sun of comfort and freedom and land for each man.

"I have carried these with me. I have keep them secret even from Fiero. If I live, Mexico will have them when there is peace again. If I die—*pues*—my little brothers will have lost both their *jéfe* and the ancient things they are fighting to share. It is not good. But a *general* can't leave his army to take trinkets to a place of safe-keeping. Not even when he has the fastest horse. . . ."

Villa stopped and wrapped his packet up carefully. But he left it on the table. He stood a long moment, staring at his prisoner. His face was set in grim, mocking lines.

Ed knew that look. It had been on Fiero's face when he had coolly used one bullet to kill the two American renegades at the court outside the tent. But the look was not in Villa's eyes. A challenge lay there, a strange and earnest message.

That look ran through Ed Dushane like the shock of a bullet.

Villa turned carelessly, started back toward a stand beside his cot.

Dushane moved, then. He dove forward, catching up the battered silver stick which held the candle on the table, and drove downward with it. Villa didn't turn as he dropped soundlessly to the floor. It didn't seem reasonable that the blow had been hard enough to stun him completely, but he lay motionless.

Ed hooked up one of the ivory-butted guns at Villa's belt. Turning back to the table, he clumsily thrust the bulk of both packets on the table into his shirt. . . .

In the darkness, he ran his fingers swiftly over the fancy mounting of a saddle to be sure he had the right animal, and swung up.

IN twenty minutes he let the horse out of the darkness of the shadowed side of the ridges to which he had held until he was free of the huge camp. Setting a course across flats opening ahead of him toward Juarez and El Paso, he let the horse reach out for its own swift stride. And he rode lightly. A new faith was in him and he clung to it.

Santiago Soltierra had not died like a fool. The ragged, savage *Villistas* were not bandits. What was coming in Mexico was war—in which the bloodiness and ruthlessness and injustice which is a part of any war would play their dreadful part.

But when the war was done and there was peace, a people which had possessed nothing for centuries would have a nation in which each man would have an equal part and an equal pride. The hard hand of the powerful over the bowed backs of the weak was doomed. And in the vaults of the consul at El Paso, there would be waiting two packets of trinkets and manuscripts and documents which were worth nothing in themselves, but which were to be a gift to the new nation from the old—a gift from the strangely mated hands of an old *hidalgo* who had believed in the new order which doomed him, and an ignorant *bandido* chieftain who had deliberately turned his back on an escaping prisoner to make certain something of the old nation his army was destroying was left upon which to found the new one!

From the towns, the fields, even the malpai of the desert, men were riding through Chihuahua. And always the proud answer to a query of where they were bound was the same:

"Vamonos con Pancho Villa!"

The words rang dominantly in Ed Dushane's ears as he rode into the north.

"We go with Pancho Villa!"

With Villa—with God—with the high, grim courage with which little men who have been slaves march toward retribution. Dushane understood, now. There was pride in him that he had known both the old and the new—that he had faced in a few hours both Santiago Soltierra and Franciso Villa. That he had a part in it. He was eager for the Border, for Texas, for a chance to talk with men who said the *Villistas* were bandits, that Mexico was a pest-hole of private wars.

He had much to say to men who thought this, much to tell them. Texans, who had hated the old Mexico, would welcome the new with a strong brotherhood. For Texans understood fighting men who counted no odds, who held liberty above death, and who marched grimly in the desert under their own leader toward the bright bonanza of a people's peace, at the end of a people's war!

BLIZZARD RAIDERS

Half frozen, Spur Whitney sought refuge from the icy white death of a howling norther in a nester cabin, never knowing that Big Bill Miller, range king, had marked all occupants of that lonely shelter for a quick and bloody finish!

CHAPTER ONE

Stranger In the Night

SPUR WHITNEY, back hunched to the gale, drifted along while old Lazibones chose the trail. He had been lost since noon when the blue norther

He fired as the door opened behind him . . .

came whipping down the Llano Estacado to blot out the horizon and make of the world a blue-white mass of snow and ice bounded by impenetrable walls hardly an arm's reach away.

He knew only that he was not far from the big bend of the Brazos, that for the last half hour his horse had picked his way slowly downward into a canyon or valley; and that they would have to find shelter in another half hour, or their bones would be found in the spring picked clean by buzzards and coyotes, bleached by the sun.

At that, he thought ruefully, such a fate would not be so bad. Sun—even on his bare bones—would be heaven compared with the bitterness of this blue-ice storm whose tiny particles bit into his lungs like a million minute knives. Even buzzards and coyotes would be company after the long loneliness of the trail.

Then Lazibones stopped. He had taken shelter behind a sparse growth of cedar trees that whipped like black ghosts in the gray dusk.

"Matter—ol boy?" Spur asked.

He could not hear his own voice. It was only a rumbling back in his head somewhere, like the distant sound of a train going over a trestle.

When the horse whinnied he could not hear that, either. He knew of it only because the dull feel of his mount between his knees and the blurred sight of Lazibones' head told him of the weak, pitiful sound that was immediately lost in the howling wind and endless whine of gale-driven sleet.

"Found something?" Spur muttered.

The horse made no response. He seemed to hunch into himself. Spur stepped down. The snow was deeper than his knees in this depression behind the cedars. It shoved up his Oregon pants and dribbled into his boots. Spur cursed with little heart. He tugged at the hackamore—long ago he had taken off the bridle and bit so that cold metal would not burn the horse's mouth—but Lazibones refused to move. He planted his hoofs solidly in the snow and let Spur drag until his neck stretched straight.

Spur gave up. He felt dizzy. While tugging at his mount he had faced the storm for a moment. Even though its force was broken by the trees, ice-laden gales lashed at his face with all the fury of a sandstorm out of hell. A vertigo swept through him and he thought that the snow between himself and Lazibones was rising to meet him.

Again the horse whinnied. Spur dropped to his knees. Lazibones had halted because he had met something in his path—something buried under the white snow-blanket.

Spur dug frantically with gloved hands. What he found was Satan's own joke. It was a lamb who blinked at him with big brown eyes and promptly blatted: *"Bah-h-h-h!"*

Now, Spur hated sheep. Being a cowboy, he had certain standard hates. He hated sheep and homesteaders and Mexicans—but most of all he hated sheep. He said he hated them because they spoiled the range for cattle. He hated homesteaders and Mexicans for almost the same reasons, but until this bitter night on the high plains it had never occurred to Spur that he might be wrong. Being a cowboy Spur had just naturally supposed he was better than other humans and that the animals with which he worked were superior to other beasts.

The lamb, on the other hand, saw a friend here in the storm. Heroically it struggled to its wabbly legs and pushed ahead through the shifting snow to rub against Spur's leg. Spur swore, drew back a foot to kick the little animal away, then halted midway through the action.

An eddy in the gale had brought to him the unmistakable odor of stew!

Lazibones smelled it, too. He let go with a really enthusiastic whinny. Spur grabbed up the hackamore and started off toward that heavenly aroma.

The horse held back. The lamb blatted. Spur hesitated. After a long moment he said, "Okay—okay. . . ."

He picked up the lamb gingerly. The little beast snuggled against him. Spur bowed into the storm and Lazibones plowed through the snow beside him.

THEY had not far to go up a partly sheltered ravine when a light in the night shone on them like a giant diamond necklace. As they came closer to it the light evolved into a plain window with a broken pane over which someone had pasted a piece of butcher paper. In its glow Spur saw that they had stumbled upon a log cabin with a big chimney at one end and a lean-to. There was a horse standing in the lean-to against the chimney.

Spur set down the lamb in some dry hay before leading Lazibones into the shelter. He unsaddled his horse, rubbed him all over with straw, then promised, "Find yuh some oats, ol' feller."

Lazibones was nuzzling the other horse, becoming acquainted. With a terrific hunger pang Spur remembered the stew. He left the lean-to, skirted the cabin wall and knocked on the door.

A voice shouted: "Come in."

Spur lifted the latch. He had to put his shoulder against the door since it was on

the side away from the storm. When he was over the threshold the wind whipped the door out of his hands and slammed it with cannon-shot loudness against the frame. Spur staggered a little. Weariness and stove-heat after bitter cold made him weak.

It was some seconds before he realized that he was facing a girl who held a shotgun in capable-looking hands. Her jaw was set. Her blue eyes showed bright sparks.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Spur grinned. It made his face feel funny as if his skin were paper and the smile crinkled it up so it could never be smoothed again. He realized now how bone tired he really was, and he knew that if the girl intended shooting him there was nothing he could do about it. He would not even be able to open the door again and run. So he sagged back to the edge of a bunk where he sat while the scatter-gun's twin muzzles followed him.

He said: "Stew—I smelled stew."

That seemed to stir a great anger in the girl. She bit at her lower lip, bringing a flood of crimson to it. The color was high on her cheeks. Her hair was black, glossy. And Spur saw that she was strong and beautiful in a red-checked shirt and sheepskin vest, in Oregon pants the same as his and beaded Indian moccasins. He saw all this and the clean curves of her beneath the rough woolens as if it were a revelation in a dream.

"Get out!" she said.

Slowly Spur shook his head. The giddiness had left his brain. He could breathe deeply now of the warm air rich with the odor of onion and stew-meat. He stretched legs that pained with cramp and cold. He could smile, too, more easily than before, and he did so. The skin of his face was not as papery as it had been.

"If you're going to shoot me, ma'am, just go ahead," he said. "I ain't leavin' until I have a plate of that stew and a quart of oats for my hoss."

The girl hesitated. Spur undoubtedly meant what he said—and she had spoken her own mind when she told him to git. It was a stalemate. There was no way of knowing what might have come of it if the lamb had not chosen that moment in which to blatt again. The girl's eyes left Spur for just a second, then snapped back to him.

Spur said, "It's only a woolly I found out in the snow. My horse fell in love with it at first smell. Horses ain't human." His eyes became as appealing as a small boy begging for copper-toed boots for Christmas. "How about just half a dish of that stew, lady, and a pint of oats for Lazibones?"

The girl's eyes were sharp. "Aren't you Millstone?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," he said. He had thawed out now and was beginning to be suspicious. He said: "I thought this was a Millstone line camp. Kinda surprised finding a lady in it. I heard Big Bill Miller needed punchers but didn't know he had been reduced to hiring girls."

"He hasn't," she said, "and I don't think you're funny. This is my own camp—and my own land." She said it with more defiance than conviction.

Spur asked: "Your own sheep, too?"

She shook her head. The dark curls danced lightly on her shoulders. The lights flamed in her eyes. She was not completely convinced that Spur could be depended upon.

She told him: "The sheep belong to Pancho—my neighbor."

Spur shuddered. Nothing worse could have happened to him. His only solace was that he had drifted into this, that he had not come deliberately. Hesitantly he asked:

"You ain't—a—homesteader?"

He had almost said "Squatter."

"I am!" she said proudly.

Spur found that he still had strength enough to lift him to his feet. He tried to put a ring into his heels as he moved toward the door. He held his shoulders straight and broad.

At the threshold he said: "If you don't mind directing me to the Millstone I'll be drifting, ma'am. Sorry to've bothered you."

The change in the girl was like the change in a Montana valley when the chinook passes and the April sun is shining. She leaned the shotgun against the wall and went over to put a hand on his rough coat sleeve.

"The least I can do for you—" she said "—is what you did for Pancho's lamb."

He stared down on her. He felt the warmth of her as he had felt the warmth from the stove. He wanted to tell her to go to hell.

"I would of kicked that woolly," he said, "'cept for the way my ol' horse carried on."

"And I would have shot you," she answered right off, "if that *woolly* hadn't spoken up when he did. Now sit down, cowboy, and we'll divide this stew. It's *beef* stew."

She put an emphasis on the word "beef." It made Spur laugh. And the first thing he knew he was eating supper with a nester.

AS HE ate the pungent stew he discovered these things: He discovered that the girl became more beautiful the more he stared at her; that never before had such a tasty stew been made; that nesters did not necessarily "stink up the range" as he had so often stated that they did. He also learned that the girl's name was Molly Putnam.

"They named a town after one of my great-great-something-or-other uncles in Connecticut," she told him. "He was a general in the Revolutionary War. But I doubt if they'll ever name anything after me but a gravestone—and I'm half the army of a civil war we're having right here in the valley!"

Spur was not paying much attention to the girl's words. He was watching the way her lips moved, how her eyes sparkled. He was marveling at the look of softness of her cheeks and of her breast where her shirt was open at the neck—for it seemed so at odds with the apparent strength of her. When she fell into a silence he had to think back on what she had said in order to carry on the conversation.

"Only relative I got to boast about is Gran'pappy Hawks. They got the ruins of a jail named after him back in Tennessee. He wanted to get out of that jail so he blew it up with a keg of black powder somebody smuggled him. He got out all right. 'Hawks' Folly', they call the remains."

The girl had frozen with her fork half way to her mouth. Her head was cocked in that curious half-slant of a person trying to listen over a conversation to some outside sound. Spur stopped talking and listened, too. He heard only the storm, the restless movement of the horses in the lean-to as each tried to hog the warmth of the chimney. The lamb blatted feebly, reminding Spur that he was a cowboy becoming mighty friendly with a sheep-loving nester. Then he heard a howling far up the valley.

"Coyotes," he said.

The girl set down her fork with a sharp click on the tin plate.

"There's no doubt about that," she answered. "But they'll be riding Millstone horses." Again her eyes were filled with that dark suspicion as she turned back to stare at him a moment. He felt his dark-tanned cheeks becoming warm. She was looking into him—deep into his soul.

"Something's happened to Pancho," she said slowly. "I should have known something had happened to him when you brought his lamb in. No sheep could get away from him, unless—"

The girl spoke with such an intensity it stirred an unknown fear in Spur that he had never before known.

He said, "What do you care? He's only a sheepherder, and a Mexican. What's he mean to you?"

"He means everything to me," she said slowly. "He's my neighbor." She pushed back her bench and sprung to her feet. With hands on the table edge she leaned toward the sitting Spur. Her voice took on an odd bitterness. "But you wouldn't know about that. You come from a tribe that doesn't have neighbors. I know you and your kind—the great, big handsome bosses of the plains. But let me tell you something, cowboy. God gave this land to everybody—not just to Big Bill Miller who thinks he can take it because he is strongest. He made this land for Pancho and me and even you, and for sheep as well as cows. And, mister, Pancho and me are going to keep our piece of it."

Spur was so astonished at her speech he could only stare up at her. He had never given much thought to these things, to his reasons—or lack of them—for despising nesters and sheep and Mexicans. He had just taken it for granted that anybody with any sense felt the same as he—and it had never occurred to him that

the great grand-niece of a Revolutionary War general could be a homesteader—to whom a sheepherder meant "everything."

The girl straightened then, shrugging her shoulders. She laughed briefly and left the table to stride across the one-room cabin toward a row of pegs on the far wall where clothing and equipment were hanging.

"Sorry I blew up," she said. "I know you're not one of Miller's gunnies. His men wouldn't have brought in a poor lost sheep nohow." She returned to the table, shrugging into one of the coats she had taken from the wall pegs. "Just crazy of me, cowboy, to think this is your business as well as Pancho's and mine. Well. . . . I'll be seing you."

A holstered six-shooter was draped with its belt over the back of the chair in which she had been sitting. She bared the gun, glanced at the lights the lamp brought to its sleekness. She twirled the cylinder with a thumb to check on the load then put the weapon into a pocket.

Smiling again, she faced Spur, and her blue eyes were big with understanding. *"Hasta luego, vaquero."*

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To see what happened to Pancho," she said.

"You haven't been out in the storm," he told her. "You couldn't go fifty feet without losing yourself."

The girl nodded confidently. "Sure I could," she insisted. "I know this country, so does the Millstone—"

She swung away. As she did so something changed in the room. She moved toward the door, and instinctively Spur knew that he should stop her. The lost lamb—coyotes on horseback—the indefinable difference in the cabin now that she was leaving, and her comment that the Millstone gunnies would know their way in the storm.

He moved swiftly toward the door, stepping ahead of her, blocking the way with his big body. He saw that she was determined to leave so he, without actually coming to a decision, started to go with her. The door opened stiffly against the suction of the wind and he had to force his broad shoulders between it and the jamb.

He did not see the gunman lurking in the darkness, and the rifle shot was only a tiny *spat* in the great storm. But Spur felt the burn of a bullet snipping along his ribs and he heard the following tinkle of breaking glass. At first he did not know what had caused the sudden darkness. Then he realized that the slug had pinked him and gone on to smash the lamp.

The girl cried out in alarm. Spur fell forward. The wind slammed the door, drowning out the blast of the second rifle shot whose bullet bit into the hard wood . . . and Spur tumbled face-down into the snow. . . .

Like moths to a light, drama and excitement crowded the lives of girls in the man's world of the West. Our companion magazine, *Rangeland Romances* will bring you their stirring stories. Don't miss "Buffalo Hunter's Sweetheart," a swift and glamorous love novel of the old frontier, also by Art Lawson, in the April issue! Now on sale!

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Callers

THE lamb blatted crazily. Spur's horse neighed. The girl's horse joined in on the insane cacophony, and the screaming wind furnished its endless obligato. Yet Spur's senses were so keened by the imminence of death he heard two tiny noises that intruded themselves into this winter's night symphony.

The first was the clicking of a rifle. The second was the lifting of the door latch.

Spur had forgotten that homesteaders were his enemies and cattlemen his allies. He thought only that bushwhackers were worse than snakes anywhere, in any clothing, and that they should be exterminated. So he sat up in the knee-deep snow, reached into his shirt where he had been carrying his six-shooter to keep it warm

and handy, and lined up the sights in the general direction of the spot from whence had come the two rifle shots.

He fired just as the door started to open behind him. Startled by the shot the girl let go the latch and the wind tore the door from her hand to bang it loudly. The rifleman answered. His slug skimmed along the snow kicking the icy bits into Spur's face. Spur laughed straight at him and punched out two more shots.

Then Spur waited. He waited until a numbness began to creep over him and heard no more from the rifleman. Finally when he could stand it no longer he stood in the snow and stumbled away from the cabin toward the spot from which the rifle shots had come.

He found a man there staring at the sky. He found a rifle. There was a sort of path dragged through the snow, already nearly obliterated by the drifts. But Spur followed this to the window that had been patched with butcher paper. From there it led to the lean-to, then vanished in the night.

When he came back, the girl was standing outside the cabin door, flat against the wall. He put out a hand and it touched her fur-covered shoulder.

"I killed him," he said. "He was looking in the window while we ate supper. Comfortable thing to think about, ain't it?"

"You better get a coat," she said. "I'll wait here."

He did not go inside immediately but went back to the spot where he had killed the bushwhacker. He found the man's hat and rifle and took them into the house. There he examined them in the red glow of the stove. The rifle was a high-power Winchester fitted with telescopic sights which were not at present in place. A curious symbol was carved into the stock, and a similar symbol was burned into the hatband of the expensive Stetson. Also on the stock of the rifle was a row of half a dozen tiny crosses.

Spur could guess what those crosses meant. He sighed with relief that he had not been the seventh. Then he fumbled around the dark room until he found his sheepskin-lined jacket. He tied a bandana over his ears, reloaded his .45, slipped it into a pocket and was ready to go. Yet he was reluctant to leave this warm room.

The girl was waiting where he had left her. She said: "Nothing moving, partner."

The "partner" gave him a jolt like a slug of whiskey on an empty stomach. He said quickly: "Feller had a funny little sign carved into his gun. Looked like a salt shaker with a bow knot tied on top."

"That's a windmill," the girl said.

Her voice shook. Always before, even when she was angry, it had not sounded like that. Spur wondered if something had frightened her. She was moving down the side of the cabin. He followed. They saddled their horses according to a system, as if they had done it that way a hundred times. He saddled up while she watched. Then she saddled.

Lazibones was ornery. He'd had enough of this storm and did not want to go out in it again. He hunched his back and swelled up his barrel so that the saddle would fit loosely. Spur kicked Lazibones a swift one in the ribs and tightened the latigo while his horse snorted in dismay.

"A horse," he observed, "will always fall for that trick. Horses are bright for horses, but dumb for humans."

The girl did not join the conversation. She was preoccupied. She was frightened, or worried.

Spur asked: "What's it mean, that windmill?"

"Windy Miller," the girl said. "It means you killed Big Bill Miller's son. He needed killing. But when Big Bill Miller finds out—"

She put a foot to the stirrup and swung aboard. . . .

SPUR could not see the girl in the blinding storm as she led the way up the valley. He only knew that he was with her because Lazibones jogged on steadily. If he had lost her, his mount would have quit and gone home. He also learned how he had happened to find the lamb in the snow. The little beast had been drifting downwind more or less since Pancho's place was evidently directly into the storm.

The gale-driven snow bit into his face like rocksalt from a double-barrelled shot-

gun, and it was not long before Spur began to wonder what had brought him to such a pass. If the boys down along the Border or up in the Powder River country heard that he had gone out on a night like this with a nester girl to help a Mex sheepherder, his rep wouldn't be worth a plugged peso.

Okay, he told himself, he wouldn't tell 'em—and if anybody else found out and spilled the beans he would have a fight on his hands. As a matter of fact, he finally convinced himself, he was following the girl only because that Windy Miller was a bushwhacker. And even if she was a nester she was a lady, wasn't she? *That* made a difference.

Gradually he became aware of a queer odor in the night. He reckoned that might be Pancho's sheep and that they were getting near the herder's camp. Then the girl halted.

Lazibones stopped with his head against the flank of her mount. She tried to pull him up alongside her with the hackamore but he would not budge. Spur kicked him in the ribs. He did not use his rowels because in the bitter cold they might cause the horse some permanent injury. Lazibones still would not move. Finally Spur had to drop down into the snow and go ahead on foot to find out what the girl wanted.

Her face was a pale miasma in the night. She leaned down to shout in Spur's ear. "They burned him out!"

Spur cursed within himself. Now he knew what that stench meant. They had burned down Pancho's sheepfold with the sheep inside and the foul odor was a combination of burned wool and scorched flesh.

"They must have burned it down this afternoon," she shouted. "We're right in his front yard. Hold my horse, and—"

He plowed past her, walking cautiously. Soon she was lost. He could hardly stand against this wind, but he kept on crouched so low his head was almost in the drifts. Now and then a bit of warmth eddied past him and a puff of foul steam and after a while he knew that he was standing on the edge of the sheepfold's ruins. He could not see anything, but the stench was strong and the cold-hot fog was everywhere.

He wondered if Pancho had had a house or if he slept with his flock. Then a sudden flickering of light behind him caused him to drop to his knees in the drifts that were thin and hard here from the fire. A shift in the wind had blown the fire up some thirty-forty yards below him. In its light he saw the horses and the girl and her face was white as a ghost's. He stumbled toward her. She had stepped out of the saddle and had been poking at a snowy mound with her toe. When he reached her she was stiff as a statue, as if she had frozen there.

In that ghastly, hellish light he saw what she found. The man's clothing was burned off. He was blackened with fire and featureless. Beside him was the body of a collie dog, shot to death. By the burned condition of the dog's tawny hair Spur knew that he had gone into the fire to rescue his master and that the gunnie who had set fire to the place had waited and watched until the dog came out—and then had killed him.

Windy Miller must have been that man who had done the killing, Spur decided. Somehow he felt cheated that he had already killed the killer.

The girl had not moved since Spur found her there. He said to her, "We better drift."

The girl seemed not to have heard him. Spur touched her and he might have touched ice. Then Spur shook her. He shook her hard. "Come on!" he shouted.

Dumbly the girl shook her head. Spur had to put his ear to her lips to hear what she said.

"There was another," she said. "Panchito. We've got to find Panchito."

SPUR had picked up a little Spanish during various of his winters spent along the Border. He knew that Panchito was the diminutive of Pancho. The "ito" did not necessarily mean "little." It might mean "darling." It might mean that this burned man was not the sheepherder, Pancho. It must mean that the girl's sweetheart who meant "everything" to her was still somewhere around in the snowy night.

"Okay!" Spur said. "We'll find him."

The flame had died down, but while it

was still flickering, Spur had spotted a couple junipers not far from the remains of the house. He struggled through the snow to the bushes. He managed to dig up his spring knife from an inside pocket and slashed off a big handful of the spicy, waxy branches. These he brought to the house and threw on the coals. He waited until the wind ignited the evergreen.

When it caught, it went up like loose powder. The flames leaped high. They lighted the whole yard. They showed no suspicious hump in the snow near the razed shack but they made plain as the warts on a toad the partly-burned, snow-covered shapes of sheep in the one-time fold. They formed an almost solid mass. Anywhere there Panchito might be hidden.

The girl seemed to realize this.

"It's no use," she muttered. "We'll come back when the storm's over. We'll come back in daylight."

Her voice was toneless. Spur thought he knew some of what she was suffering. Though it made no sense to him that she should be in love with a sheepherder, he knew that it must have almost killed her to find that he had died this way. An impulse suddenly hit him and he stepped between her and the storm and took her in his arms. She did not go into his arms, nor did she resist him. But when he kissed her she leaned against him and what he had intended to be only a fatherly caress or a big-brother kiss suddenly started his heart to beating like a Comanche war drum.

He dropped her and jumped away. She blinked at him. Her blue eyes flew wide open as she stared at him in terror. He had kissed plenty of girls in his day but had never affected any of them like this. Then she sprang at him, punching at him and shouting:

"Don't! Don't. . . !"

His spurs caught in the hard snow and he tripped. She fell on top of him. As she did so a shotgun boomed so close he felt the heat of its powder and heard the scream of its buckshot. He heard a devilish howling in addition to that, and the continuous shouting of the girl. The two terrified horses neighed, then bolted. Spur rolled over under the girl.

The fire had almost died out. Yet it remained bright enough for him to see his would-be bushwhacker. Apparently this little man had been in ambush behind one of the juniper clumps and had come out to make the kill. Undoubtedly the girl had saved Spur's life.

The bushwhacker, standing in the snow, open-mouthed, hardly holding his shotgun, was horrified at what he thought he had done. He was only a youngster about ten years old, and never before had he tried to kill a man. . . .

THEY took him down to the girl's cabin, walking him part way to keep him from freezing, and carrying him only when he became too exhausted to make another step. None of the three bothered with conversation. A couple times the youngster shouted something in Spanish that Spur could not translate. Apparently the night's tragedy had left him hysterical, if not actually unbalanced, and he was threatening death and worse to those who had burned up his sheep outfit.

Once he even started to battle Spur whom he insisted on mistaking as an enemy. He put up a mighty big fight for such a little shaver and Spur had a lot of trouble subduing him. Spur did not want to hurt him, and Spur was so dog tired he could hardly scrap back.

Neither Spur nor the girl mentioned the fact that her cabin would become the unhealthiest spot in the valley once Windy Miller was found dead in her front yard. They only knew that they had to get the child to a warm place if they were to save his life. Whatever dangers they might be running were secondary.

It was after midnight when they reached the cabin. The horses were ahead of them, crowded against the chimney. The fire in the stove was nearly out. While Molly stirred it up, Spur set the youngster on the bunk and covered him with a blanket. They warmed up an old sadiron and a brick which they put into bed with him.

For a moment the girl and cowboy stared at each other. She turned away first. Spur tossed a log into the firebox feeling the good heat of the fire against his face. He was choked up. A fist gripped his heart.

He glanced over at the nester girl who

was sitting on the bunk's edge looking down at the Mexican boy. There was something so poignantly beautiful about the curve of her back and thigh he had to run away.

"I better unsaddle them horses," he said.

"Okay." She did not glance around at him.

He tried to get past her with Windy Miller's rifle and Stetson, but she said: "Going to shoot them first?"

"Sure," he said. "And I'm going to use this hat to fan the flies off 'em."

He left in a hurry. He kicked around in the snow until he found the dead man who was stiff as a log. Windy was big and heavy, awkward to carry when frozen this way. It took a lot of hauling to load him aboard the girl's horse who did not want to carry him anyway. Then Spur unsaddled Lazibones. That old-timer would not be any more use tonight. Taking him up to Pancho's again would kill him.

Spur headed north on foot leading the loaded horse. He knew his way now without having to look—upslope into the eye of the wind. And he could smell out the last half of the route. After a while he began to forget what he was doing.

He remembered falling flat on his face in the snow. He remembered finding a steamy place where he dumped Windy Miller and that bushwhacker's gun and hat. He remembered trying to climb into the saddle of Molly Putnam's horse.

He could not make it—and inanely, he began to laugh. . . .

HE FELL against a door. Someone opened it and hauled him inside. He lay on the floor and said: "Jus' driftin' by. You don' mind, I'll sleep here."

Molly left him alone. Dawn was just over the hills. The wind had dropped to a moan. What snow still swirled around was mostly blown from the trees. Little Panchito had finally gone to sleep but the night had been horrible with unknown fears. With dawn, Big Bill Miller would arrive. But would the cowboy who had come in from the night ever return?

She could not even hope for that. She knew how he hated nesters and sheep. She believed he even despised girls, though he had kissed her up there at Pancho's place. And, besides, he had stolen her horse. He had gone with Windy Miller's expensive rifle and forty dollar hat.

Now he was back, lying on her floor.

She leaned over him and kissed his cheek. Then she stirred up the stove and boiled some coffee. The good odor of it filled the cabin, finally reaching Spur and his bloody dreams. He sat up. The girl whirled about when she became conscious of his movement and stared at him. He grinned back.

"How'd I get here?" he asked.

"In one of those new parlor cars," she said. "The U.P. has a silver-plated siding right up to the back of the house."

"I thought so," he said. "And the conductor has white wings and wears a gold cinch ring for a hat. I seen that train go by, sister. But I missed it."

He tried to stand up but could not make it. The girl brought coffee and two cups. She added a bit of whisky to his. It built a friendly fire within him and spread warmth and life all through him. She sat cross-legged on the floor beside him, sipping slowly at her cup.

While she poured his second cup he said, "Life—it's crazier than women! Last night I was only a wandering cowboy. I drop in at what I think is a line camp for a bite of stew. And before we get to the coffee, look what happens!" He jerked a thumb toward the sleeping boy.

The girl laughed. "Mighty fast, aren't we?"

He asked: "He going to be okay?"

"I—think so," she said.

He drank the second cup. Now he could stand, though weakly. He walked across the room balancing himself with a hand on the table and fell into a rawhide bottomed chair near the stove. It had taken an awful lot out of him to make that little trip.

When he got his breath back, he said: "Open the door, ma'am. I want to see what the weather's like."

She did as she was told. A cold rush of air swept the room. Dawn had come, but there would be no sun this day. The

sky was gray like the cold lead in a plumber's melting pot with its flecking of scale. The snow lay in smooth rolls on the ground showing no sign of the titanic struggles that had taken place there during the night.

"You can close it now," he said.

She shut the door and stood with her back to it trying to read Spur's motives in asking her to do these things.

"I did two things last night I never would have believed I'd do," he said. "I carried a little lamb home—and a sheepherder's boy. You're next."

The girl gasped.

Spur grinned. "Wonder what great gran'pappy Hawks would say if I carried home a nester girl?"

He waited for no answer. He closed his eyes, fell back in the chair, and went to sleep. The girl smiled secretively. Quietly she tiptoed across the room and kissed the cowboy on the forehead just below the red mark made by his hat band. She saw that the fitfully-sleeping Mexican boy was covered. Then, like a cat, she curled up on a coyote pelt at the base of the stove and slept. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Crimson Snow

SPUR woke to a hard pounding on the door. He heard horses stamping in the snow and the creaking of leather. Then the knock came again, hard and sharp as if made by a gun-butt, and a man shouted:

"Open up! It's Big Bill Miller!"

Spur tried to get to the door. He had expected that Miller would come searching for his son, Windy, or to complete the chore that Windy had left half done. But when the cattle-king shouted his challenge Spur found that he could not move. It was as if his legs had been wired to the chair, they were so stiff, and the wound in his side seemed to reopen with the effort.

While he was struggling to get up, Molly Putnam leaped to her feet. Hurrying across the small room she straightened her lustrous hair with a shake of her head and a quick brush of her hand. She flashed Spur a brief, unworried smile; motioned that he should remain in the chair where he had been sleeping. Then she picked up her shotgun to have it ready when she slipped the heavy latch.

She held the gun in her left hand behind the door. Spur shifted his six-shooter to a ready position under the blanket over his knees. Though Molly put her slender body between Spur and the doorway she did not succeed in completely cutting off his view of the two men who had stopped out there. Nor did she prevent them from seeing him.

For the briefest instant their hard faces showed surprise at Spur's presence in the girl's cabin. The older of the two men, heavy and gray, with down-curving mustaches the color of cast iron, gave him only a scornful glance.

That would be Big Bill Miller, Spur reckoned, for he had the ruthless look of that range lord's reputation.

The second man, as lean as Spur and about the same age, would be one of Big Bill's trusted gunnies. He was a killer from his cold eyes to shifting feet. He was a young man who looked long at the girl before turning to Spur. There was more curiosity in his glance than there had been in Big Bill Miller's. Handsome in a dark, smooth way, he seemed to look upon Spur as a possible rival, as a range bull will examine another who has drifted in off the prairie.

The older man did the talking. He kept his eyes straight and hard on the girl's face while he spoke.

"One of my boys came in last night saying he smelled smoke. We thought it might be a brush fire. Anyway, Windy rode up-canyon to have a look-see and he never come home. Didn't happen to see him, did yuh?"

"No," the girl said. "And if I had, I'd have turned him right around. We can take care of our own troubles up here in the canyon."

Spur liked the way she stood up to these two men. There was something almighty big about her, a mysterious woman-courage that he could never know. It was the kind of courage that would carry her through any disaster. But this present job was a man's chore, not woman's work, and Spur knew that he had to take it for his own. Fate had brought him here to

do this thing. No longer could he run from it or try to reason his way out of it.

He tried again to stand. The move brought attention to him. Cold air streaming in the open doorway woke the Mexican youngster who sat up stiffly in the bed. His eyes were big and black with wonder, then flooded with fear when he recognized the visitors.

Shrilly he shouted: *"Ladrónes—asesinos!"*

The girl leaped across the room just in time to block Miller's gunnie who had started over the threshold toward the youngster. She sat kitty-cornered on the bed beside the boy, one arm around his shoulders, her slender body sheltering him.

Then Big Bill Miller said: "Let him be, Slick! Pancho's kid, ain't he? When'd he move in, sister?"

"What's it to you?" she snapped.

Spur's hand was relaxing on the gun under the blanket. He had nearly shot the man named Slick. Now he smiled thinly and said: "I brought him in, mister, if it's any of your affair. It was his place that burned last night. It was his smoke your cowboy smelled."

Spur had taken them all by surprise, even the girl. She would not have admitted anything to her enemies. The others would not have expected the truth from her, nor would they have thought Spur would do anything except adhere strictly to the girl's strategy. Spur saw this, and he followed up his momentary advantage.

"I was looking for the Millstone," he said. "Hunting a job. But I got lost in this storm and when I stumbled across the sheep ranch it was burned flat. I heard a lamb blatting and pretty soon found it under a spread of juniper. This kid was there—out of his head. He blamed me for burning down the place and tried to kill me."

The girl still clung to the boy, trying to comfort and silence him. But the tension of her cheek muscles told Spur that she was becoming alarmed. After all, she did not know him. He had not been ready to be her friend last night—and maybe this day would turn him up as an agent of the Millstone where he said he wanted to work. She had only his word that he had killed Windy Miller. She had not seen Windy's body.

Spur guessed some of this. "Maybe this Windy bogged down up there somewhere," he said. "If you figure on going up-canyon I'll ride along with you."

Briefly the girl's eyes were on him, blue and puzzling. Big Bill Miller said: "We're the Millstone. Sorry you didn't find us last night. I'm Miller. This is Slick Holt, my ramrod. We'll be glad to have you side us up to Pancho's, mister, but from there on you go alone—and keep going. We don't exactly cotton to strangers in this country."

Spur shrugged. He said nothing as he managed to slip his six-shooter from his knee to holster. To stand he had to turn his back on the people at the door and push himself upright with his arms. He did so casually, slowly—and the pains of his stiffness shot lightning bolts through his legs and up his spine. And the place where Windy Miller's bushwhack bullet had scorched his ribs began to burn with a heatless fire.

His face was white when he reached the doorway. Sweat beaded his cold forehead. Trying to speak lightly he said: "Name's Spur Whitney, from Montana way. Used to work on the Fiddle where the Powder meets the Graystone. If I act kinda stiff in the joints it's because I damn near froze to death last night. The joke's on me, mister. I come south because I don't like cold weather."

He grinned broadly. Big Bill Miller's face took on no more expression than a pan full of frying eggs. He did not offer to shake with Spur.

"Glad to meet yuh," he said.

Slick Holt did not offer a hand to Spur, either. They waited while the cowboy painfully fetched sheep-lined coat and Stetson. They backed away from the door to let him pass. Spur turned a moment to speak to the girl on the bunk.

"Thanks for putting me up, miss. Reckon I won't be seeing you again. I'm drifting south after we case the Mex's place."

Her blue eyes were dark, intent as a mountain lion watching an elk. She did not know if he had been frightened by Big Bill's speech, or if he was hinting something in his talk of drifting.

He added: "Yes, ma'am—it'll be a lot cozier on the Border. Be seein 'yuh!"

"Drop in when you head north again," she said.

"Thanks."

He went on to the leanto. He hoped she had savvied his remarks. Slick Holt followed him. The lamb that Spur had brought in from the storm stood up when his hero appeared and bleated. Coldly Slick Holt stepped over and kicked the little beast out of the way, into a drift. Spur's fists clenched.

The lamb, crying out with terror, tried to scoot around the shack. Slick let him nearly make it. Then the gunnie's hand dropped to gun-butt with incredible swiftness. Laughing, he shot the lamb very neatly in the back of the head.

Spur went about saddling old Lazibones. He knew that gesture had been for his benefit. But the thing that struck him most forcefully was the similarity of the deaths of that lamb and Pancho's sheepdog.

He wondered if the same man had killed both. . . .

THEY took the canyon trail with Spur in the middle—the meat in the sandwich—while Slick broke trail and Big Bill Miller silently brought up the rear. Spur was their prisoner, no more, no less, despite the fact that he had deliberately turned himself over to them. It was quite apparent that they did not trust him any farther than they could have thrown a buffalo bull by his beard. It was evident that they would kill him as casually as Slick had shot the lamb if it happened that they thought it wise to eliminate him.

Yet this was as Spur wanted it. This was showdown. Before night crept over the Llano Estacado again the battle would be finished. The blue-eyed girl could be well on her way to the Border by then, and Spur would be following. Or Spur would not be interested in the affair's outcome.

As they jogged along Spur laughed inwardly. He had grown up since yesterday when he would have punched in the face of any man who might have accused him of a friendship with nesters or sheepherders. Now he was risking his life, fighting the most powerful man in the region so that a nester girl and a ten-year-old Mexican sheepherder could live in peace. Nor did it seem odd to him on this brilliant, crisp day. It was, simply, destiny—and as destiny he accepted it.

The terrain looked so different in daytime that Spur would never have recognized it, except for the odor that soon drifted to them and increased as they approached Pancho's. The stink of burned wood seemed stronger in the daytime than it had at night. Then they were coming into the clearing where Pancho's house had once stood, and Slick reached into his coat for a six-shooter. With four shots he killed four coyotes before the other two men left the trail to come up beside him.

And a couple of buzzards, so gorged they could not get up a proper running start in the deep snow, floundered and flapped until Slick shot their heads off. Casually, he reloaded, plowed ahead.

Spur felt sick. The coyotes had preferred uncooked meat. They had left the half-burned sheep in the fold while they feasted off Pancho's dog—and Pancho's enemy, and they had not left enough of Windy Miller's frozen flesh to be recognized.

Around him, forming a cross in the bloody snow was the quartet of coyotes that had feasted off him and had been shot by Slick Holt. But only Slick had an eye for these. When the three riders had pulled to a halt there at a spot not far from Pancho's front doorstep, Slick slid from the saddle and examined his catch. He ran blunt fingers through the thick fur of one of the coyotes and found it good. Then, whistling softly through his teeth, he turned to the dead man.

Apparently he did not immediately guess that it was the boss's son. Most of the clothing had been ripped from the body. The few shreds that were left had been mangled beyond recognition. But Slick was curious and he prodded at the body with his toe.

"Pancho—" he started. Then the word gagged in his throat.

It was at that instant that he realized he had made a mistake. Up to now it

had not occurred to him that Windy would be found there. Windy had been specifically sent out last night to kill the girl. He had been told by Big Bill to keep away from the sheepherder camp since another party had been assigned to clean up the Mexicans.

But Big Bill, on the other hand, must have seen the handwriting on the wall. He must have known from the beginning that the mangled man they had found surrounded by coyotes was his son.

He screamed at Slick and fumbled with cold fingers at coat buttons in frantic search of his six-shooter.

"Stop it! Stop it!"

That was all Big Bill could get out. Slick backed away hurriedly. In doing so he tripped over Windy's rifle that had been hidden in the snow. He recovered the weapon and beat snow from it. His expression was a queer thing.

Spur guessed that Slick was afraid of his half crazy boss who had just learned of Windy's horrible fate. But Spur also noticed another thing that curiously fascinated him—Slick Holt might be afraid of Big Bill Miller—but he was pleased with Windy's death.

Slick's expression of sorrow was entirely false. His next move was undiluted hypocrisy. Slick Holt slipped out of his warm coat and covered Windy's body.

"Thanks," Big Bill Miller said.

His deep voice trembled. Spur suspected that he saw through Slick's "gallant" gesture. Now the first terrible shock of seeing Slick Holt prod his son's mangled body as if it were that of a dog passed out of Big Bill. He became again the cattle king who had been too intent on building an empire to have developed a heart. Though this no-good son had meant everything to him—because Windy had been the living picture of his father—Big Bill could not spare time for him now that he was gone. There was work to do. Crying was for women—sorrowing was an activity that had to be reserved for lonely midnights.

At present there was only one thing to do. The range had to be completely and permanently cleared of those people whom Big Bill Miller claimed had no right to be there—of the people whom he blamed for his son's death.

Then slowly, like some ponderous mechanical statue, he turned his head to face Spur Whitney. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Who Hated Nesters

THE cowboy felt Big Bill Miller's eyes on him. He felt Slick Holt watching him and saw that the wily gunman licked his lips as if contemplating a fine hot dinner. Then pictures of a dead dog, of a dead lamb—pictures of dead coyotes and buzzards and men flashed through Spur's mind—pictures that congealed in the back of Spur's head where a tiny prickling sensation centered near the top of his spine. He had met killers before—many of them—but never one like this Slick Holt, who would kill and laugh and kill again only because it gave him solid pleasure.

Spur heard Big Bill Miller's voice as if it were coming from a great distance. "Looks like another body yonderly, don't it, cowboy?"

"Damned if it don't!" Spur said.

Spur tried to sound no more perturbed than anyone would be with an affair that did not concern him. That he failed, he had no doubt. Yet once the bluff had begun he had to carry it through, so he added: "I'll drop down and look."

"Suppose you didn't have time to look around last night?" Big Bill said. "That would have been the right time."

"It was dark," Spur said. "That norther was cutting like red-hot sand. A feller don't look around for the fun of it on a night like last night."

"Hadn't thought of that," Big Bill said. "Okay, cowboy. Get down and look now."

Spur slipped from the saddle. He felt as if he had no more joints in his legs, as if his bones were bending each time he moved—and that burning pain in his side had become a dull, endless ache. Yet he gathered his strength to kick his way through the snow to the blackened, half-covered cinders that had been Pancho. He turned back to face the two Millstone men.

"Looks like the dog pulled this one out of the fire. That other one—" He pointed

toward the covered body of Windy Miller —"must have shot it out with this one."

Big Bill smiled with his teeth.

"That's exactly how it looks," he said slowly.

He did not move from the saddle. While Spur's back had been turned toward him, Big Bill had slipped his gun from his coat. With his bare right hand he held the pistol flat against his stomach. He covered it with his gloved left hand to keep weapon and trigger-finger warm.

"It looks so much like that you'd almost think Windy and Pancho had acted it out so the sheriff would make no mistake," the old cattleman went on. "But—what killed the dog, Slicker?"

The gunman bent over the shepherd. After a slow examination he announced: "Gunshot."

Big Bill's gray mustaches stretched in that soulless smile.

"One thing Windy really liked was dogs. Used to sleep with dogs when he was a kid. Always had half a dozen of 'em. Windy'd stay up all night with a sick dog—when he'd let his best friend die alone. Wouldn't he, Slick?"

Slick Holt nodded dumbly.

Big Bill's voice became crisp. "You were the one who hated dogs, Slick. They were always getting under your feet. What happened up here? Did Windy catch you plugging this mutt?"

Slick's face went white. This whole affair had suddenly been lifted from Spur's hands. The one factor of which he had been innocent had taken the whole business from him. Now it was between Slick Holt and Big Bill Miller, and it looked as if Slick's insane cruelty had finally caught up with him.

"Speak up!" Big Bill snapped.

Slick's two hands were both busy holding the rifle of Windy Miller that he had picked from the snow. Nervously, his gloved fingers played with the bolt. He looked deep into Hell for a moment, then he said swiftly. "I killed the dog. It tried to bite me. But Windy never came up here under his own power. He was carried up. There's two shots out of this rifle. One is in the middle of Molly Putnam's front door. You saw it, yourself, bright as a lantern this morning. The other—"

Slick hesitated. The other bullet had taken a goodly bite from Spur's ribs. Slick's eyes narrowed and he laughed. He had just about talked himself out of the toughest tight he had ever been in.

"Let's see how far you can run, cowboy, with Windy's last bullet in your side," Slick suggested. "Might be we'll be able to carve a seventh cross on this gunbutt, after all!"

There it was, slapped right back into Spur's lap. Showdown had come. It was not quite as Spur would have ordered it, but here it was just the same and he was satisfied. In one way he had a bit more of an advantage than he had expected. He was facing these men instead of having one at his back—and he was armed despite the fact that his six-shooter was not very handy inside his heavy coat.

Spur said: "I forgot how to run, gunslicker. I forgot last night when you burned down a house on a ten-year-old kid—and Windy Miller tried to bushwhack a girl. Last night I became ashamed of the fact that I was cowfolks. . . . Now, damn you, go ahead and shoot!"

That speech stirred Big Big Miller. He said with slow maliciousness: "Show him all cowfolks ain't skunks, Slick. Show him you ain't a bushwhacker. Give him a chance to fetch his gun out from under his coat. Then shoot it out when I give the signal."

That was not Slick's way. Nor was it Big Bill's, really, and Spur was not fooled. If Slick missed, Big Bill would be sure to shoot him down. Big Bill would not give him the chance he ordered his ramrod to give.

Spur began to reach for his gun. Slick Holt gnawed at his lower lip. He shot an appealing glance at his boss and looked right down Big Bill's gun barrel. Then he dropped the rifle and snatched at his holster for his pistol." He lined his sights long before Spur's gun was free.

The blast of his gun was vicious and sharp. It seemed to hurt even before the bullet clipped Spur's shoulder. The heavy lead slapped Spur backwards, spinning him, dropping him into the drifts.

And it gave him that final bit of resolution that he needed.

He shot through the snow, not bothering to lift his gun, and it set up a long

feather before him that pointed straight for Slick Holt's set face. He shot, knowing that Big Bill Miller now had a pistol turned on him and that he could never turn his gun in time to pick off the rancher. It was bitter to fail like this—yet it was good to know that he could squeeze the trigger once more and make sure of Slick Holt's death. The hammer bit into a cap, and Slick slithered down into the snowdrifts to form a star pattern with four coyotes making the other points.

And Big Bill Miller shot point blank at this stranger cowboy who had drifted in from the stormy night to upset all his carefully calculated killer plans. In that last, lucid moment, Spur saw the icelike color of Big Bill's blue eyes. He saw that color over Big Bill's sights—and he could no longer bring his own gun to bear. He could only sit there like a frozen jackrabbit.

It was then that he heard a shrill shout as if from the other world to which he was traveling.

"Asesino!"

The word meant "Killer," but Spur Whitney did not know that. Spur knew only that it was the Mexican youngster's voice.

Then Big Bill Miller did a queer thing. He squinted his eyes as if facing a sudden, blinding light. He put a hand to his face and the six-shooter fired as if by itself, missing Spur, then jumping from Big Bill's fingers. Hours later, it seemed, Spur learned the reason for this. The sharp, clear bark of a rifle sang from downslope somewhere along the trail.

Spur kept his eyes open until he saw the dark-haired girl bending over him. Then he let himself go. Just before he passed out, he heard her whispering:

"I couldn't run away like you hinted I should. . . . Oh—darling!"

Fickle, Spur thought, just like a woman to be fickle like that, calling him "darling" . . .

SPUR got better slowly. The Mexican boy rounded up half a dozen sheep that had escaped the fire and coyotes. He took these to town and swapped them for groceries. He shot a Millstone steer for meat and hung it back in the timber where the sheriff wouldn't find it. He did about all the chores around the cabin except for the cooking and sewing. Those were Molly Putnam's jobs—woman's work.

And as he got better Spur found himself watching her moving about the cabin. Deft and sure and lovely she was; her presence there a satisfying thing. Spur began to wonder about the day when he would be well enough to ride and would have to leave. Then one afternoon he could not stand it any longer. She was resting, studying the fire.

"You and that sheepherder," he said, "you ever talk of getting married?"

"Of course not!" She was startled. "Why?"

"You said—" Spur had trouble explaining—"that he meant everything to you."

"He was my neighbor. Neighbors mean everything to each other, don't they? If we hadn't gone up there to help him—if you hadn't helped me—if I hadn't helped you—"

She did not explain further for she felt that Spur would have to understand this for himself. She glanced at him again. He had been making a mighty broad hint in that question.

"Got any sky-pilots for neighbors?" Spur grinned broadly.

"Sure," she said. "A very nice one. He lives down Blue Valley way. Last time I went to town he promised he'd come out any time I needed him."

It was her turn to grin at Spur, and Spur's turn to feel heat creep from his face to ears. Good grief, he thought with sudden horror, what would the boys along the Powder say when they heard that Spur Whitney had married a nester girl? And suppose they learned that he'd practically been trapped into it?

"The hell with them!" he said aloud.

"Who?" she asked. "Sky-pilots?"

"No," he said. "Come over here and I'll whisper it to you."

She came to him, warm from the fire, her blue eyes puzzled. Spur made her sit on the bed. He made her put her ear close to his mouth.

Then he kissed her. . . .

THE END

HOME-GROWN TERROR!

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

"What you carrying beside the gold?" Johnny asked.

"Like father, like son," they said of Johnny Braze, whose dad had been one of the toughest outlaws in that stretch of cow-country. So, branded outcast, he decided to have the game as well as the name—even if he had to stick his head in a murderer's noose to do it!

JOHNNY BRAZE was drinking a beer, when Bart Shanter stormed in, slamming out Johnny's name like a curse. A sudden silence slapped across the buzzing saloon, and Johnny felt that mad helplessness again as he swung abruptly around. He stood there, looking at Shanter, but he didn't say anything.

Shanter glared at him truculently, a big florid man, hot-tempered and domineering. Then he said in a flat, spitting way: "You damn' cow-thief."

A sudden haste scattered the crowd away from Shanter and Johnny Braze. For the word cow-thief was more than an accusation in that time and place; it was a special challenge, and in all self-respect a man had only one answer. Yet Johnny Braze didn't reach for his gun. He said quietly, No, Shanter. You're wrong."

Shanter's laugh was nasty, faintly frustrated. "Not wrong," he contradicted, "just not enough. Besides being a cow-thief, you're yellow."

Johnny felt a hot flush of anger surging across his flat cheeks, but still he kept his voice even. "I've never rustled your stock," he said, "and I reckon you haven't any proof. But likely you figure you don't need it, all of you always expecting the worst from a man like me."

"I been missing cows," Shanter said, "and I've had my hunch. But now I've found a branding iron of yours ten miles into my range, beside a burnt-out fire. Could a man ask for more?"

Johnny was startled. He didn't know how any iron of his could have gotten on Shanter's range. He said: "If you say you found the iron, I reckon you did. But I don't know how it got there. Take it to court if you want."

"It wouldn't be enough in court," Shanter rasped, "and you know it. So we'll settle it out of court, and right now. You're wearing a gun, Braze, and so am I. Drag iron!"

Johnny blew out his breath in a rush. "No," he said, "I'm damned if I will. I'll not let you make me admit to something I didn't do just by going for my gun. To hell with you!"

Shanter's face purpled, and for an instant it seemed he'd go for his gun anyway, but that would have been too raw even for him. "All right," he said, with thick scorn, "but just keep crawling around, and somebody's going to stomp on your head. Just set foot on my range once again, and I'll shoot you on sight. Another thing—and I'm saying it before witnesses—if I'm ever found bushwhacked now, you're the one to hang!"

He wheeled and strode out of the saloon, his boot-heels cracking with angry disgust.

Johnny turned back to his drink. The buzz of conversation picked up again, but no one joined him at the bar. Even when men talked or worked with him, there was always this wall left around him, made of their reserve and suspicion, a part of their friendliness which they never quite gave to the son of the outlaw, Black Tom Braze.

Johnny wondered again why he stayed on here where he was known, branded with a heritage that was like a curse. But he had that proud, stubborn streak to stick it out defiantly where the going was toughest, just because taking the easier way would seem a kind of quitting.

Suddenly he left his drink half finished and went outside. The night was warm and sultry, tanged with the wild sweet scent of the wilderness prairies. Window lights splashed the darkness with bright cheer, and there was a shadowed murmur of voices, and somewhere an easy lilt of laughter. This was a town wrapped warmly in its own life, and he had again that heavy feeling of being apart, left out and unwanted.

He crossed the street, and went into the pleasantly spiced gloom of Nathan Alden's big store. Old Nathan was laid up again with his rheumatism, but his girl, Nell, was behind the counter, the kerosene lamp striking warm soft glints from her brown hair.

SLENDER, dark-eyed and rosy-cheeked, she had a quiet air of good breeding that always made Johnny a little embarrassed. Yet she said, "Evening, Johnny," and gave him that quick friendly smile.

She always did seem to go out of her way to be friendly to him, and because he thought she just pitied him it hurt and stung, the more so because he so often caught himself thinking about her, through long silent hours on the range, through the black proud loneliness of his nights.

It made him wish he was a clean-named man, whom a decent woman could favor. He said, in that proud stiff way: "Evening, Miss Nell. I'd like about five pounds of rock salt."

As she turned to get it, she murmured, with a certain impishness, "Salt to rub in his wounds."

He said, "Huh?" a little confused, and then explained, "I put it out for my cattle. They like to lick it."

"Oh," Nell said, "my mistake," and began wrapping up the purchase.

"The salt works just like a fence," he continued, wanting to talk, yet feeling foolish and angry that his loneliness

should make him babble so. "I put it out a few miles from my water-holes, and the critters graze out and lick it. That makes 'em thirsty so they drift back to the water holes to drink. That way the salt keeps 'em sort of tied right to the water holes, and they never stray far."

"Do tell," the girl marveled. "I just bet lots of women wish they could figure out something as good to keep the menfolks from straying. Which reminds me, there's a dance at the school-house tomorrow night. Coming in?"

He thought she was poking fun, and it hurt. She knew he never mixed in. "Since when," he asked, "have the wolves started flocking up with the sheep?"

"Oh, nonsense," she said, a little sharply. "If some folks didn't always go around with their hackles up, just expecting to be called a wolf, maybe people wouldn't always think they were one."

Johnny's quick glance was wary. "Well, maybe," he said. "But a brand burns deep. You can vent it maybe, but you can't wipe it out." He paid for the salt, turned, and walked to the door.

Her soft voice followed him, amused, faintly challenging. "I'm going to the dance," she said. "And I expect I'll dance right out in public with any of my friends who happen to be there."

He walked on out without answering. He got on his horse and headed for home. A warm restless wind pulsed beneath the flaring stars, sad and lonely, rolling in darkly from the far pungent depths of grasslands.

He thought glumly of Shanter, of that branding iron someone had planted on Shanter's range. It was always like this, folks ready to believe the worst of Black Tom's son, a ready-made dupe for anyone who wanted to saddle another with blame for anything.

If he went to the dance tomorrow night, maybe Nell Alden would dance right out in public with him. But maybe, too, she'd refuse, in front of everybody, and that was a kind of humiliating chance he'd learned to duck.

Always his thoughts of Nell were like this, like a wild creature warily circling a fire, attracted, mystified, yet never quite daring to go all the way in.

He was almost home when he happened to glance back, and glimpsed, through dim star-light, the shadowy figure of a rider. He kept looking back, noting that the distance to the horseman behind remained unchanged. He tried slowing his jogging pony to a walk, and the rider behind slowed too, and he knew then that he was being followed.

Watchful, wondering, he rode on to his cabin, corraled his pony, and went inside. He lit a lamp, but was careful not to put his silhouette against the window. On the defensive, as always, he was waiting it out, and, a few minutes later, was not surprised to hear the sudden sharp whinny of a horse arriving outside.

An instant later, boot-heels crunched toward the door, and a voice challenged, "Hello, the house!"

Johnny was thinking of Bart Shanter, and moved cautiously, his right hand close to his gun, stepping swiftly aside as he swung the door open. But it wasn't Shanter; it was Lew Olston, and Johnny, puzzled, stepped back less warily. Olston came in grinning.

"A visit with you, Johnny," he said, and helped himself to a chair. Square-built, swarthy, with that too-quick grin, he had pale eyes that darted ceaselessly in their shrewd sockets. "Just a friendly chat," he insisted.

"Why, sure," Johnny said, and lounged his high back against the wall, "you're welcome, Lew, if you mean it the way you say."

"How else could I mean it?"

"Well," Johnny said, "you followed me out from town."

Olston's gaze flicked across him. "Well, yes," he admitted. "I saw Shanter try to brace you in the saloon. I hate his innards, Johnny, just as much as you do. I don't blame you for wanting to kill him."

"I never said I wanted to kill him."

"But he's framing you," Olston exclaimed, "just on account he hated your father! He planted that brand-iron of yours himself."

"I don't think so," Johnny said. "He's done some killing, spread a lot of misery, helped run down my father. But he does it all pretty legal. Likely he did find an iron of mine over there, planted by someone who knew just how he'd act when he found it."

"Don't be such an easy-mark," Olston scoffed. "Shanter aims to gun you off this range, same as me. He figures to wholehog all the grass west of town, take both your little spread and my big one. He's been trying for a showdown with me, too. Why, if Shanter was out of the way, I'd control everything he's grazing. . . . Johnny, I'm not a man to forget my friends. If anything should happen to Shanter, I just reckon I could find a couple thousand cold cash for you."

"So that's it!" Johnny said. "Seems I can always get the answers if I just wait them out. You planted that iron of mine on Shanter's range, knowing he'd call me, that maybe I'd kill him. But it didn't quite work, so you're trying to force it, figuring I'm sore enough now to hire out my gun and backshoot him for you."

His voice went soft and deadly. "You want my answer, eh? All right, here it is. Just take yourself to hell out of here, and don't ever show me your rat face again."

Olston lunged to his feet, suddenly enraged. "Say, who d'you think you are?" he bellowed. "No son of Black Tom Braze can talk to *me* that way! Trying to raise the ante, eh? Yeah, Black Tom Braze was never afraid to turn a dishonest penny, and neither is his son!"

Johnny took a long step forward. His fist cracked solidly against Olston's jaw, sent him crashing against the wall.

Olston grabbed for his gun, but Johnny's was already whipping up, and he said, "Don't; don't try it!" and Olston's reaching hand went suddenly still.

He straightened up, holding his jaw, and then he walked stiffly to the door. He said: "Smart, eh? Always figure everything out. Well, you're too damn' smart, and now you'll find it out, and pronto."

He walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Johnny fooled around the cabin, mad and confused, black with gloom. Presently he got a bottle of whiskey off a shelf, took a stiff drink. He did it a little defiantly, because he was not a drinking man, that being just one more way he tried to disprove the name of wilding. Anybody but himself, he thought, could have declared innocence to Shanter, and made it stick, and with anybody else Olston wouldn't have the gall to urge a murder.

And any other man could take it to Matt Harkness and expect the old sheriff to listen with an open mind. But even Matt, fair and friendly as he was, would still measure his words skeptically, against his name.

Johnny took another long drink, felt it hotly grab his innards. Ever since he was a kid, he'd been making this losing fight against what folks insisted on believing of him. He'd almost come to believe it himself, like the man told constantly he's looking poorly, until finally he really is sick. Maybe it really was in his blood, that wilding strain, and maybe his fight was mostly just against himself. He'd always remembered his father loyally, even a little proudly, and he knew that Black Tom had been, in his roistering way, as big-hearted a man as ever lived—as many a broken-down cow-hand could attest, or widow or orphan or starving homesteader.

He remembered the night his father had died. . . .

"A man learns," Black Tom had said, "but sometimes powerfully late. I'd die easier, son, if I figured you'd try playing it straight."

"Sure," Johnny had said, his voice breaking a little, because he was only fourteen then. "Sure, Dad."

"Feel like making it a regular promise, son?"

Johnny had blinked back tears. "Sure, Dad. You bet. It's a—promise."

The old outlaw had grinned faintly, as though his son's promise gave some strange absolution, took a long sighing breath, and then the wild and reckless span of his years was over.

And Johnny had played it straight. Alone and friendless, against suspicion, almost a cow at a time, he had built his little spread. Yet what was it worth to any man, except to shelter a woman and maybe kids and warm his life and spread it around a little?

And what woman would ever live in any house of Black Tom Braze's son? Not Nell Alden. That's just a star in the sky, boy, and no hand of yours can ever reach that high.

A man was only what folks thought him. Why buck it any longer? Why not throw it straight back in their faces, as

his father would have done, in some wild and laughing way?

Swaying a little, Johnny took off his gun. He opened a brass-bound trunk, took out his father's old six-shooter. He had never worn it, but always he had kept it oiled and cleaned. Now he loaded it, and, for the first time, buckled it around his own waist. That seemed to settle something, and he blew out the lamp, and went outside. He saddled up his pony, and rode off.

He felt strangely light-headed, seeming to soar gently along, the stars twinkling bright and close around him. But still he knew just where he was going, and why. He threw back his head and laughed. It was as though he had been long fettered, and now, suddenly, he was free.

A HALF hour later, Johnny reached Squaw Creek, and reined off the moonlit road, into the concealing willows, close beside the tinkling stream. He waited there, and presently he heard the sound which he was expecting, a distant rumble-mutter of approaching stage wheels.

He knotted a bandana across his face, tugged down the brim of his sombrero. Drawing his father's gun, he held it lightly in his hand. As from long habit, as though his years were joining now irrevocably with his father's, he seemed to know just what to do, as though somehow he had done all this many times before.

He thought not at all of any loot he might take from the stage. This high excitement was born of succumbing to a dark adventure made tempting and mysterious only by his own long resistance to it.

The rumble of the stage deepened. Suddenly he saw it top the rise beyond the stream, come rolling down the slope and into the creek, water spraying and foaming around flashing hoofs and turning wheels like silver fire in the moonlight.

As the horses pawed up the near bank, and the coach lurched back to solid ground, Johnny jumped his pony squarely across the road. He sent one shot above the driver's head, and then shouted, rather cheerfully, "Hold it, friend, and up with your hands!"

The driver, throwing one startled glance at Johnny, pulled down the rearing horses, and then, seeing himself covered, cursed and lifted his hands.

Why this was easy! Johnny thought. He rode up to the boot, keeping his gun leveled. The next stop, of course, was to steal something. But all of an instant, Johnny didn't want to steal. He wanted to do a hold-up, not to steal, but to do a hold-up you *had* to steal. Johnny was getting a little confused.

He decided to prolong the issue, and asked companionably, "Say, driver, what you carrying tonight?"

The driver grunted angrily. "No passengers," he taunted. "And not much else. Just a little gold-dust. If it'd been more I'd of risked a run for it."

The gold didn't appeal to Johnny. "What you carrying besides the gold?" he asked.

"Nothing," the driver gloated. "Except just a dressed chicken for old Doc Henderson in Broken Saddle."

Johnny grinned suddenly. "Well," he said, "I'll take the chicken."

"Huh?" the driver asked. "The chicken, too?"

"Not the chicken, too," Johnny said. "*Just* the chicken."

The driver gaped. He asked, as if doubting his own hearing, "You want just the chicken? You don't want the gold dust?"

"That's right," Johnny said. "Just the chicken. Hand it down."

Slowly, eyes bulging, the driver handed down a paper package.

Johnny took it politely. "Much obliged," he said.

The driver was still staring blankly. Then he said, in a rush, "Well, I'll be damned!"

JOHNNY got back to his ranch at dawn. He went inside, and promptly finished off the bottle of whiskey. He was feeling pretty proud of himself. He bet his father had never staged a better hold-up than he had. Good, that's what he was. Once he did remember,

with a guilty pang. Well, he'd tried it all right, but everyone except himself had thought it must be crooked, until finally, somehow, it was.

He let his thoughts go back more pleasantly to the hold-up. If he'd really stolen the gold now he wouldn't have felt so good. Pretty smart, he thought, just taking the chicken. That made him a sure-enough badman, without any of the low-down feeling that came from really hurting other folks. Except Doc Henderson.

The doc was a fine old hombre, and Johnny reckoned maybe he just had his mouth all set for that chicken. He began prowling glumly around the shack, and now his glance kept avoiding the chicken. Yes, the old doc was going to feel right bad, come dinner time, and no chicken. Johnny paused, scratching his head. Suddenly he grinned, and swung around, glaring a little defiantly at the chicken.

"Chicken," he announced, "I stole you, so now you're mine. Ain't no law says I can't give something of mine to old Doc Henderson if I want. That wouldn't mean I still didn't steal you in the first place. Why, just giving you back to Doc Henderson ain't going to make my hold-up unlegal nohow!"

Johnny felt relieved and happy again. He grabbed up the chicken, hurried outside, got up on his horse again. In the bright morning sunlight he headed for town. . . .

An hour later he was in Broken Saddle, riding up the dusty main street. He saw Nell Alden, sweeping the sidewalk in front of her father's store, and reined up. He swung down, clutching the tattered package containing the chicken, and swept off his sombrero in a gallant bow to the girl.

"Howdy, Miss Alden," he greeted formally. "You're sure looking right pert this fine morning."

The pretty girl stood leaning on the broom, her eyes suddenly startled. "Johnny," she said, "you've been drinking. Johnny, you're drunk!"

"Yes, ma'am," Johnny agreed, proudly. "Always did figure I could get drunk if I'd just try. Wasn't even hard. Miss Nell, I'm plumb bad now. Why, I reckon old Sheriff Matt would give his eye-teeth to get his hands on a terror like me!"

The girl's gaze was frightened and suddenly a little hopeless. "Johnny, you fool," she said. "What have you gone and done?"

"Shh," he whispered. "It's a secret. Can't tell. But it's uncommon bad, Miss Nell. Sure is!"

Her eyes brimmed then with quick tears. "Oh, Johnny, what have they done to you? Come inside, and I'll make you some strong coffee."

"No," Johnny refused, "got to see a man." He patted the chicken under his arm. "Belongs to me now, got a right to give it back if I want."

She looked past him quickly, caught her breath, and he followed her gaze. He saw Sheriff Matt Harkness, clumping toward him along the sidewalk, and beside the old sheriff, looking puzzled and angry, was Lew Olston.

Johnny said, "Oh, gosh," and then he put a finger to his lips, and began to tiptoe backward, while the sheriff continued toward him, staring at him in a confused wary way.

"You, Johnny," he barked, "stand where you are!" And he suddenly pulled his gun.

"Aw," Johnny said, disappointed, "he must have heard me trying to walk away."

The sheriff stopped about twenty feet away. "You've got your gall," he growled, "coming right back to town."

"Say," Johnny marveled, "how'd you find out so soon? You're a right smart

Harry F. Olmsted, whose tensely thrilling drama, "Rope Trick" appears in this issue, has written for the May DIME WESTERN another one of his powerful epics of the frontier—the rise and rule of a Wyoming range tycoon, who staked all his vast empire on the turn of fate—and a fast trigger! Buy the next issue March 31st!

sheriff, Mister Harkness." Then he looked suspicious. "Or maybe you're just trying to prove I didn't do it. Well, you can't." He tapped the chicken under his arm. "I got the evidence right here. Yes, *sir!* Wanna look?"

"So you even admit it!" The old sheriff sighed gustily. "Well, everybody knows how you crossed horns with him in the saloon last night, anyway. And Lew here found him before he died. He managed to tell Lew how you called him out of his house, then just shot him down in cold blood."

"And you'll hang for it!" Lew Olston blared in. "You back-shooting killer!"

Johnny heard Nell Alden's stricken little cry, and he stared blankly at the sheriff, and then suddenly, as from any hard shock, he was sober, cold sober. He could almost feel the whiskey fumes whoosh out of him.

"Hey," he said. "Hey! What's this? I don't know what you're talking about?"

"You just admitted it," the sheriff reminded. "Killing Bart Shanter!"

JOHNNY glanced at the sheriff, and then sharply at Olston. He shook his head, as though throwing off a haze. And then suddenly the whole picture was clear and startling. "Wait now, Sheriff," he protested. "Sure, I had words with Shanter last night, and Olston followed me on home. Olston as good as admitted he'd planted a branding iron of mine on Shanter's range, trying to force a fight between us. When it didn't work, he tried to hire me to gun Shanter, and I knocked him down. So he left mad, and went straight to Shanter, I reckon, shot him, and then says I did it, figuring everybody's always ready to believe the worst of me."

Olston's shifty glance darted over the sheriff, and then he threw back his head and laughed. "Listen to him talk!" he roared. "Listen to the son of Black Tom Braze! Just a chip off the old block!"

"Johnny, it won't hold water," Matt Harkness said. "Maybe it was true after all, that Black Tom's son had to go bad."

Johnny looked at him. He said suddenly: "You're right at that. I went bad all right, and maybe that's just how I can prove I ain't."

"You're drunk," Harkness said.

"Was," Johnny corrected. "But not now. Tell me, Matt, did the stage driver see you this morning, tell you something funny?"

The sheriff looked surprised. "How'd you know about that? Yeah, some fool stuck up the stage, only took a dressed chicken, and wouldn't even touch the gold! Must have been loco!"

"Like a fox," Johnny said, "only he didn't know it then. Here you are." He tossed the package containing the chicken, and it plopped in front of the sheriff, and burst open. The sheriff gaped at the plucked naked bird, at Doc Henderson's name scrawled on the package, and then glared up at Johnny.

"Why," he accused, "you held up the stage, too!"

"I held up the stage," Johnny agreed. "What time did the driver say I stopped him?"

"About six."

"And when was Shanter killed?"

"About the same time."

"And twenty miles away," Johnny added.

"Hey!" the sheriff said. "How could you kill Shanter when you was holding up the stage twenty miles away?"

"That's what I'm wondering myself," Johnny said. "Maybe you better ask Olston."

But Olston wasn't waiting to be asked anything now. He was suddenly running sideways, pulling his gun, and in three long jumps had thrown himself behind Nell Alden. He jerked her protectingly against him, and his right hand thrust his gun past her, toward the sheriff.

Harkness had heeled around, swinging his weapon toward Olston, but he couldn't fire for fear of hitting the struggling girl.

Johnny moved then, in a quick whirling swoop, and suddenly, gun in hand, he was behind Olston. Olston started to turn toward him, but that exposed his back to the sheriff, and he hesitated, caught between them. Johnny leaped toward him, and he threw the girl aside then, his gun blasting as he whirled.

Johnny felt a bullet smack his left shoulder, staggering him, but then he straight-

ened, and his own gun bellowed three smashing shots, so close together that they sounded like a single rolling explosion. That hail of bullets battered Olston over, beat him into the ground. He twitched a couple of times, and then lay still on the board walk.

Nell had run forward, toward Johnny, but the sheriff stepped between them. "Here, now," he said, "I'll clean up here. You take that shoulder over to Doc Henderson's office, son, and I'll see you about this stage business later. And you better take the doc his chicken."

"That's what I was trying to do, anyway," Johnny protested. He picked up the bedraggled chicken, staring at it ruefully. "Say, it sure looks like hell now. I bet the doc's going to be fightin' mad."

A COUPLE of hours later Johnny went back to the sheriff's office. "Well, Matt," he said, "I reckon you aim to arrest me, huh?"

The sheriff grunted. "Don't always be so dang sure, what others aim to do," he growled. "Johnny, that girl Nell, she's smart. Been telling me how a lot of loose tongues can just naturally talk a man into being something he ain't. Yeah, things have come to a pretty pass when the only way a man can prove he's honest is just by up and committing a crime! That's just what you did, Johnny, because if you hadn't stuck up that stage you'd as sure as shooting got hung for Shanter's murder.

"No, I'm not arresting you. I'm making you a deputy sheriff instead, just to pin a star on you so maybe when some muddle-headed folks see it they'll know from now on they're looking at a man, and a plumb decent one."

Johnny thought about that for an instant, and then a slow grin warmed his lean face. "Matt," he said, "I've been a kind of lonely mink. But maybe now it's going to be different. Matt, I'm obliged to you."

"Thank that Nell girl," Harkness said, "not me. Say, she left a message for you, something about rock salt, said as how she could show you some that could keep a man from straying as much as cattle."

"Hey!" Johnny said. And he went out of that office, fast, and hot-footed it down to the store.

Nell was behind the counter, and several customers were milling around. She asked quickly, "How's your shoulder, Johnny?"

"All right," he said, "I'm just glad it wasn't my leg." He was embarrassed by the other people in the store, and said with heavy casualness, "About that new kind of rock salt I hear you got, I'd like to try some."

"We haven't any right here," Nell said. "But maybe I could bring some to the dance tonight."

"Say, if a man went to a dance," Johnny mused, "and maybe sort of asked a pretty woman to kind of be his wife—I wonder what she'd say?"

"I expect she'd say yes." The girl's eyes were laughing now. "I expect she'd say yes just mighty quick, before he ever had a chance to change his mind."

Johnny turned around and walked to the door. Over his shoulder he called back, "That's why I'm glad I got shot in the shoulder, instead of the leg. A man with a game leg can't cut much of a shindig at a dance, and I'm sure aiming to go to a dance tonight!"

• • LAND BUCCANEERS

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Justly famed for its old-world hospitality was King MacKenzie's fabulous Rancho San Franciscquito. But the last time Clint Ord rode there, he found, instead of the hearty hand-clasp of his rancher friend, a strange and deadly welcome — straight from the snarling guns of a hundred gold-mad renegades!

CHAPTER ONE

Hot Lead for a Welcome

THE slug flung up a gout of sand half a dozen yards from Ord's horse. Ord pulled sharply up, staring, waiting for the sound of the shot to

OF FRANCISQUITO • •

Novelette of Old California

roll down the canyon from higher ground. It came at last, muffled and faint, from far up on the rim. For a moment Ord had an impulse to dive from his saddle for shelter. Then a grin creased his weary, trail-grimed face, and he urged his mount forward again.

On a ranch so big it ran mule deer herds large enough to put venison on every hand's table the year around, a stray rifle slug was no hostile sign.

King McKenzie often boasted of the

The renegade crew broke and ran madly....

size of his Rancho San Francisquito. Ord could hear him, now:

"I could hide an army in my hills, Clint —two of 'em, by hell, and they could carry on a first class war without me even knowing about it!"

This shot would make a good joke, later, when Clint was at the big house at the top of the canyon and old King was across a table from him. He'd call in his *California* wife, the regal Doña Inés, and tell the story again. Doña

Inés would smile in her quiet way and pour fresh glasses of wine.

Later, Rosalie would come in from the stables and boast that this year the ranch had *real* horses in the corrals, and that however good a drover Clint Ord might be, he'd never drive fifty of them east to Fort Leavenworth without turning gray-headed along the way.

It made good thinking, all of this. Twice a year Clint came into this ranch in the folded purple hills behind the City of the Angels. Twice a year he left it, driving a select herd of horses east to the army market in Kansas. Two long, hard trips. But the reward for them was the few weeks with King McKenzie.

The man was, himself, as fabulous as his ranch. A Scot, he had quit his berth in one of the first English ships which had touched at Monterey. He had become the friend of a man who needed friends, and he had stuck through the thin years of the man's political life. Years later, that man became governor of the province. It was from this governor that McKenzie had received the two things he prized most in life: Doña Inés, the old man's daughter, and the Rancho San Francisquito.

King McKenzie, and after him, his own daughter, Rosalie, had that magician's touch, which, with the climate of the hills about his domain, bred the finest horses in the Western world. They were his pride. And they had been the beginning of his friendship for the young buyer who repeatedly crossed the barrier of the deserts and the great divide to find better stock for the army. That friendship had grown strong in three years. Coming to San Francisquito was like coming home. Clint was grinning in anticipation when the second shot ruffled his jacket.

This was no accident. The sound of the shot came down on the heels of the lead, itself. Jerking his head up as he jumped his horse out of the trail, Clint saw a little haze of muzzle-smoke drifting away from a clump of manzanita on the rim. There must be real trouble on San Francisquito when King McKenzie closed the hospitable gates of his rancho either to friend or stranger.

The man on the rim fired again, cutting closer. Clint held his horse on up the talus of the canyon wall until a bulge shielded him from the marksman above. But the gate was well guarded. Across the canyon, another rifle opened up. Wheeling, he put his mount into a broken run as fast as the trail-weary animal could make the weaving turns, and beat back down the canyon toward its mouth. There was another way onto the higher land which formed the ranch. McKenzie had once shown it to him. It meant an hour longer in the saddle, but if King's sentries wouldn't let a friend get close enough to identify himself, then he'd have to circle and ride in unannounced!

ORD came onto San Francisquito over a goat trail winding through sharp ridges west of the main ranch. This trail brought him over a low pass into the valley which headed the canyon where he had been fired on. In the center of this valley, the rambling big house stood. A mile away were the stables, the corrals, and the feed-barns. Below the house King had dammed the canyon to form a little lake. Between the lake and the house Doña Inés had built up a garden no mission along the *Camino Real* could match.

Now all this was changed, and Clint stared in disbelief. The little lake was gone, drained away. Doña Inés' garden was a welter of sluices, gravel-heaps and slush-pools. Tents were pitched on the rolling lawn before the house. Corral fences were down. Debris littered the whole compound.

Just as Captain Sutter's empire had fallen in the north when mill-hands rolled nuggets out of the American River, San Francisquito was festering with gold-hunters. It explained the riflemen down-canyon.

If news of the strike didn't leak out of the rancho, the rush wouldn't become general. But it was hard to believe that King McKenzie, who made a good living and a proud one out of his land and his stock, would order the defacement of his citadel for all of the gold in California.

Slowly Clint tipped down into the valley. Below, men stopped working to watch him. A big, black-bearded man moved

away from the center of the diggings and waited for him to ride up to the verandah of the big house. Behind the man, Clint could see a patio littered with refuse—broken whiskey bottles, the rubble of innumerable cigarette stubs. His face was hard set when he swung down from leather. The hawk-faced man on the porch eyed him coldly.

"You're a lucky gent, brother!" the man said shortly. "There's rifles pointing down every canyon in these hills!"

Clint nodded. The hawk-faced man stirred an instinctive, powerful dislike in him. He wasn't a McKenzie type, wholly unlike the genial, loyal hands with which old King had carefully staffed his domain.

"All of Mister McKenzie's friends are lucky when they ride into his ranch. Where is he?"

"The old man?" The miner shrugged disinterestedly. "Why, he sold out. He sold out lock, stock, and barrel—to me! And you ain't no friend of mine, brother. Ben Stone's got no friends when he's in payin' sand!"

Clint's eyes raised out over the ruin of Doña Inés' gracious garden. A great weight hung in the center of him.

"Gold?" he queried.

Ben Stone's face screwed up. "Take some advice, brother," he said. "Ride—don't ask questions! Jest up-saddle and ride out quiet. Take the canyon trail and don't look back!"

Ord stiffened. "Damn your gold!" he growled. "Where's King McKenzie?"

Ben Stone's color deepened. "You're crowding time, brother," he snarled. "How the devil do I know where the old duffer is? Maybe down in a mud house in Puebla Los Angeles. Maybe in hell! You better start moving!"

Clint backed to his horse. Two men had come out of the house at Stone's back. They stood a little to one side. Ord knew Stone wanted him dead but withheld the word from these two because of the loose-hung gun at Clint's own hip.

Cautiously he turned his mount, speared his toe into the stirrup, and swung up. One of the two beside Stone leaned forward, but the miner stopped him with a touch, a hard smile across his face.

Clint turned in the saddle, watching the men on the porch until he was at the limit of a hand-gun's range. Then he flopped forward flat in his saddle and set steel to his horse. The animal was McKenzie bred, and the long crossing had not damped out all of its speed.

Clint expected a rifle to open up on him from the house, but it didn't. He straightened and rode grimly down the canyon. Ahead, somewhere, were the sentries on the rim. If they'd try to kill a man riding into San Francisquito to protect their secret, they'd not miss a stranger outbound who had seen the sluices in the old lake-bed.

Stone was confident that the sentries would stop him. Ord smiled savagely to himself. They'd try, all right. And the odds were with them. But a man learns a lot of tricks and grows a fast gun, making two trips a year across a wilderness shunned by Fremont and Carson and Jedediah Smith!

IN SPITE of his caution, however, Clint rode almost full-face into the sentries. His mind was jammed with puzzlement over the nature of the disaster which could have forced McKenzie to sell his beloved hills and move his family out of the home he had built for them.

The guards were down from the rim now—three of them, and spread among boulders across the narrows of the canyon under the towering pinnacle of Chimney Rock. Clint caught a flashing glimpse of one of them as he raised up with his rifle. He tumbled from the saddle a second before a heavy slug plowed into the cantle and twisted the tight-cinched kak far to one side.

The horse, smarting under that solid blow, pivoted around, buck-jumping, and masked Clint's dive for the shelter of a little up-thrusting of rock. The man who had fired the first shot, his vision apparently obscured by the jumping horse, seemed to think he'd nailed his quarry. He hurdled his shelter and ran forward. One of his fellows shouted a hoarse warning. Just as the man plowed to a frantic stop, turning to race back, Clint dropped him.

The other two opened up in earnest. Clint held his fire, unwilling to be caught

with an empty gun. The firing died after a moment. Then he caught a shadowy glimpse of one of them, working around to one side through the rocks. He snapped a shot, missed, and began to swear with a steady, bitter heat. In moments the circling man would be a little above him and with an unimpeded angle. If he moved around his up-thrusting, the man in the middle of the canyon bed could tag him. He sat motionless, his eyes lacing the rocks, waiting.

But when a gun fired, finally ending that grim, crawling wait, the sound did not come from the position of either of the two guards, but down the canyon, behind them. In the rocks above Clint, the man who had been circling him spun and then sprawled out limply in plain sight.

The man on the canyon floor, evidently thinking he was exposed to the rifleman behind him, scuttled for a new position. He went fast and bent low. The space he crossed was narrow. Clint felt a savage pride when he saw his bullet strike home, rolling the man into a lifeless bundle on the sand.

Cautiously, Clint rose and walked from his shelter. He moved to his horse, straightened the gouged saddle, swung up, and rode through the narrows at a deliberate pace. He kept his eyes fastened on a clump of brush from which the strange rifle-shot had come. But when the man hailed him, it was from against the sheer wall of the canyon, on the other side. Clint jerked around. A tall, thin, weathered man with a shock of white hair and huge, bony hands stood leaning unconcernedly on the muzzle of his rifle.

"Howdy, Clint!" the man said.

Clint Ord's stiffened body relaxed. A fresh stab of life shot through him. He raised eagerly in his stirrups.

"Jim! Jim McNary!" he breathed.

CHAPTER TWO

Traitor Brand

OLD JIM McNARY, ex-trapper, plainsman and horse-lover, was the first hand ever hired at Rancho San Francisquito. His association with King McKenzie dated to the time when they both had been drifters, roaming the streets of the provincial headquarters at Monterey, looking for a way to make a living in this broad, lazy country they had adopted.

He had grown old in McKenzie's service, loyal in his position as King's confidant and most trusted friend.

Clint swung from the saddle, shoving his hand out. McNary took it in a grip that made Clint wince.

"You damn young mountain-goat!" McNary complained, "You've been runnin' me ragged all day. I was watchin' the canyon and seen you comin' in. I cut acrost to reach you, but them coyotes on the rim had turned you back. I figgered you'd go in over the hill-trail, but you got there ahead of me. Then you went out down the canyon and crossed me up again. Like to never kept you in sight!"

Clint grinned. "I'd have ridden a hell of a lot more comfortably if I'd known you were watching me, you old horny-toad!" he answered. Then his face sobered. "What's happened, Jim—where's King?"

McNary lifted his rifle and moved across to his own horse. He didn't answer until he was in the saddle and had ridden back alongside of Clint.

"There was a big redwood, must have been forty feet through, that stood over a camp me and King had when we was prowling, years ago. One time, when we come back from a hunt, wind had stretched that tree flat. Wasn't much of a wind and that was a hell of a big tree, solid and stout as an oak. But the wind hit quick, hard, and just right. King and me moved on. That tree didn't look right, on the ground. That's the way it is here, son. King is dead!"

McNary's voice, a dry and nasal whang, was soft and touched with the gentle burr of a forgotten childhood. His eyes were watery and he bit off a huge chew from a black plug with grim determination when he stopped.

Clint felt himself loosen in the saddle. King McKenzie, a man cut from a generous mold long since thrown away, was dead! It was impossible. And yet it had to be true. Ord's staggered mind reached out for McNary's simile of the fallen red-

wood. It fitted. McNary spat, shifted his chew and started his horse forward.

"We'll git nothin' but lead in our bellies, sittin' here, Clint. We'll shove an' I'll tell you what I know."

IT WAS thirty miles into the sprawling town growing around the plaza in front of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels, and the town was in sight down the slope of Cahuenga Pass before McNary had completed his story. It was an impossible thing, a bold, coolly worked out plan that could have succeeded only in the Californias, where one man paid little attention to his neighbor's affairs, and the big ranchos like San Francisquito were kingdoms, as remote from the rest of the country as if an ocean surrounded each one.

Without warning, this Ben Stone had ridden into the ranch with forty men at his back. There was, he said, gold in the canyon-head just below the house and in the little lake. He was pre-empting mineral rights. King McKenzie could—if he wanted—continue to operate as he always had, provided he didn't contest Stone's mineral claims.

Knowing King, Clint could imagine what the old man said to Stone. He bunched a few of his vaqueros and tried to drive the intruder out. The vaqueros were killed. He tried to get word to the outside. His messenger was killed. King, Doña Inés, and Rosalie, together with the house servants, were virtually prisoners in the house. They managed to escape during a storm.

But they were pursued, Stone frantic that they would carry word of his seizure and the gold out of the hills. It developed into a running fight, and in the end, rather than surrender, King McKenzie took up a gun in one hand and walked out to face the miner's crew.

After the old man's death, the women gave up and would have been recaptured, except for the timely arrival of one Captain Ruel Thurston, a recent frequent visitor at the ranch who came to court Rosalie. At apparently considerable risk, Thurston had turned back Stone's force and spirited the women away to his house in Los Angeles.

"Mind you, son," McNary said heavily, "I didn't jest wake up one mornin', knowin' all this. I was up in the San Joaquin Valley when Stone come in. I come back to the rancho and run into about what you did, only I wasn't as lucky as you. The devils got a good chunk of lead in me and I had to lay in the hills for a month, gettin' to my feet again. By that time, Thurston had Doña Inés and Rosalie in Los Angeles. I found 'em there and got the story."

"What's this Thurston done?" Clint wanted to know.

McNary shrugged. "He's cap'n of a Boston trading ship. He's got her tied up at San Pedro and claims to be usin' his influence with Mexican authorities to get the army up to the rancho and clean it out."

"You're helping him, then?" Clint put his questions sharply, piecing the thing together.

"I ain't!" McNary snapped. "Ruell Thurston is a slick-haired, mealy-mouthed petticoat-chaser! I never liked him an' I don't now. What he's gotten out of this government for Miss Rosalie and Doña Inés you could put in a pig's eye!"

McNary turned down a mud-rutted street in the heart of the pueblo and pulled up before a battered adobe house. Another thought had been troubling Clint. He voiced it as he swung down.

"Gold—in Doña Inés' garden! Too bad King didn't know that, years ago!"

McNary snorted. "Too bad! Why hell, Clint, me and King found that color there before ever a brick was laid on San Francisquito. Fact is, we dammed the creek and backed that little lake in there to hide it. King aimed to build a stock ranch and he had as little use for gold as the *haciendados* that were born here! Only thing that gets me is how this Ben Stone found out that color was there. Only King and me knew, at first. Seems reasonable he told Doña Inés and mebbe Rosalie. But nobody else ever knew. I'd swear to it!"

McNARY loosened the gun at his side significantly before he hammered the knocker on the door in front of him. Clint scowled at the

dusty, bedraggled yard. The door opened and a huge Negro peered out at them from the dim interior.

McNary pushed forward. The doorman made a small move as though to block the way, but fell back under the lash of McNary's faded old eyes. Keeping close behind Jim, Clint followed through a shabby hall to another door. McNary pushed this open, stepped through, and to one side.

A fire burned in a plastered fireplace across this room. Seated in chairs on either side of the hearth were an old woman and a young girl. Standing beside a small window, a tall, elaborately dressed man jerked his head around at the intrusion. His lips turned down when he saw McNary. The old woman spoke first.

"Jaime!" she quavered. "Jaime McNary! You've come back to stay, this time?"

McNary avoided the question, making his answer with a gentle courtliness which came strangely from a rough-hewn, horn-handed mountain man. "I brung you company, Doña Inés—company you'll be as glad to see as I was!"

He stepped aside. King McKenzie's wife rose to her feet. She ceased to be an old woman as she rose. For a moment Clint had a feeling he was standing again in the great entry hall at San Francisquito.

She came eagerly, her hands out before her.

"Clinton Ord!" she said. "Ah, the world is not entirely an evil place when good friends return, *hijo mio!* I have, at least, faithful Jaime and you, my son—and Rosalia. . . ."

Doña Inés turned toward the girl. Clint's eyes followed hers. He had come to King McKenzie's ranch the first time to buy stock. Always after that, there had been another magnet, also. A drumming eagerness built up in him, waiting for Rosalie to speak. But before her lips moved, she flung a quick, uneasy look at the tall man by the window. Then her words were carefully flat and lifeless, as though she wanted to conceal anything between Clint and herself from the stranger.

"Hello, Clint," she said.

Clint stepped forward, reaching for her hand, but the tall man shoved in between them. "Just a minute!" he snapped. "I take it that you're Ord, the horse-trader?"

Clint nodded.

"I'm Captain Ruell Thurston," the tall man said. "Yesterday I had the good luck to catch one of Ben Stone's guards out in the canyon below the ranch. I worked him over and I found out something I think both of these ladies should know!"

He turned to Rosalie. "That guard finally admitted that Ben Stone found out about the gold in the canyon from a horse-trader named Clinton Ord. Stone's force was guided onto the ranch by an old renegade named McNary, who was supposed, at the time, to be on an errand for your father up in the San Joaquin. These two men, posing as your friends, are Ben Stone's partners!"

Jim McNary sucked his breath in audibly, but he held himself in check. Clint watched Thurston. The man was quick on his feet. Clint was certain that Thurston had hatched this lie quite coolly while he stood by the window after Jim and himself had come in. Doña Inés spoke sharply.

"This thing I do not believe, *Capitan* Thurston!" she said.

The man shrugged, his eyes on Rosalie. The girl's face had blanched. She stared at Clint with disbelief. Then her face began to gather a slow, deep color and her eyes hardened.

Here was open proof of the grip Thurston had gained over her. Clint saw with sudden emptiness that he no longer had any claim on King McKenzie's daughter.

Thurston, watching the girl's face change, smiled thinly. "I have been unable to make the local authorities here take any steps against Stone. But if I take them a pair of prisoners, they'll hold them for us, and we'll have made a little step toward getting back the ranch, at least!"

Thurston swung across toward the door. McNary nudged Clint's elbow. Clint caught Thurston's shoulder, pulled him half around, and sledged a short, vicious stab at the man's chin.

Thurston rocked his head, missed some of the bite of the blow, but it dropped him. McNary wheeled out the door, knocking the charging hulk of the big

"I'm worried about Ma..."

This boy is a casualty.

A few days ago, he was a hardened fighting man—with a glint in his eye and a set to his mouth that boded ill for his Axis foes.

Tonight he's just a bewildered lad. Bad news from home has hit him—and put him out of action—as effectively as an enemy bullet. Desperately he has tried to solve a problem back home; his mother ill, lonely, helpless—and apparently nothing he can do about it.

Tortured by doubt and uncertainty, he's come to the Red Cross Field Director for help. He'll get it.

It is the job of Red Cross Field Men to unravel human snarls. Across their desks, sometimes no better than battered crates, more than 1,500,000 men in the past year have poured their troubles—have asked for and received counsel and assistance. Daily and nightly, with our armed forces from Africa to India, from Iceland to New Guinea, they are keeping up the morale our fighting men *must* have.

Not only to the fighting men but to War's victims wherever they can be reached the Red Cross is carrying relief supplies, clothing, medicines. The cost is tremendous and ever-increasing.

The Second War Fund is greater than the First, but no greater than the increased needs.

Give more this year—give double if you can.

Your Dollars help make possible the

AMERICAN RED CROSS

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house-guard to one side with a reckless sweep of his gun-barrel.

As Clint plunged after him, he had a confused impression of the looks on the faces of the two women they left behind them. Doña Inés had a high fire in her eyes and the touch of a gentle, prideful smile at the corners of her sorrowful mouth.

But Rosalie stood in judgment, a swift and bitter hatred masking the softness of her face for two men who now stood traitors in her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Floating Cache

FLINT ORD and McNary cut clear through the pueblo when they left Ruell Thurston's house so that the confusion of the settlement would mask the direction they had taken. A little after dusk, McNary drew up beside one of the many gateways to Rancho Santa Monica y San Vicente, south of the town. Clint rode up beside him.

"Know where the *alcalde* and the captain of the garrison live?" he barked. McNary looked sharply at him.

"They could be found, I reckon. What you planning, son?"

"I'm going to do what Thurston claims he's been trying to do!" Clint stormed. "I'm going to get the government hot after Ben Stone. I'm going to get those devils off of San Francisquito—by morning!"

McNary shook his head wearily. "Listen, now, Clint," he protested. "You been off in the States for a season. You don't think I'd be twiddlin' my thumbs if there was ary a thing a man could do with the government hombres, do you? It ain't rightly their fault. They've got their hands plenty busy. They's four-five different gents aim to boss California. What with one little revolt and danger of another one while their back's turned, they can't be worryin' about what one gringo says has happened to another gringo—even to King McKenzie.

"Thurston's kept the women out of sight. He won't let them see the officials. And if he did, I don't reckon there'd be anything done but a lot of sympathy handed out! That angle's no good!"

Clint hunched lower in his saddle, his mind racing back over the past twelve hours. Suddenly he straightened.

"How far's this ship that Thurston's supposed to be captain of?"

"At the harbor, down to San Pedro. Through this gate and two hours south, if we pound leather."

Clint nodded. "We'll pound it, Jim," he said softly. "You said you got a look at Stone's crew. They look like miners? They look like wagon-men?"

McNary's face screwed up tight. Suddenly he slapped his thigh.

"Why, damn me! I ought to of seen that. Sailors! Ever man of 'em sailors—even Stone, by hell! Son, you've done what I've been tryin' for weeks. You've tied Ruell Thurston into this where he belongs!"

Clint shook his head. "Maybe not. But if his crew isn't on that ship, we'll be on a straight trail, or I miss my guess!"

ORD and McNary found, by inquiry at Bandini's store on the water-front, which of the ships anchored in the roadstead was Captain Thurston's *Empress*. Bandini rented them a dory and they started across the dark-shrouded harbor.

Before they were two hundred yards from the shore, a party of horsemen thundered up to the store. There was loud talk, the sounds of which carried over the water. Then two more boats put out, rowing with practised swiftness toward the *Empress*.

McNary, who had been rowing, started to dip his blades again, hurrying to get clear of the oncoming boats.

"Hold it!" Clint snapped softly. "It's darker than hell. If we possum it out, they're apt to go by us!"

The two new boats from shore drew closer. Clint could hear a man in one calling to a man in the other.

"What makes you think them two that was at Bandini's ahead of us is the horse-trader and old McNary, Cap'n?" The voice was unmistakably that of Ben Stone! Clint nodded to himself. Thurston answered from the other boat.

"Because they ain't fools, Ben!" Thurston snapped. "You let 'em take a look at the diggings. Then you let 'em get away. Next step, they hunted me down. Now, they'll look the *Empress* over!"

Ben Stone growled. "I'll get 'em if they come around the ranch again! You think it's smart to put this dust aboard the *Empress* if they're prowlin'?"

There was silence for a moment between the two boats. Then Thurston answered again.

"We've probably scared 'em off, coming out like this. And they've got no way of tying me up with the diggings—yet. Now, shut up. Let's get aboard!"

In their own boat, Jim McNary leaned forward and clamped his fingers tight around Clint's knee.

Clint felt the same lift of excitement, the same strong elation. They waited restlessly while the two other boats pulled on past them. Lights winked as lanterns came up on the deck of the *Empress*. A ladder was flung over the side and the two dories emptied onto the deck.

Clint saw that two guards patrolled the rail of the ship, watching the water. He watched the horizon, afraid that the moon would come over and expose them. Finally men climbed down the ladder into the small boats again.

Clint tried to count them and judged that if Thurston had left any additional men on the *Empress*, they didn't number above two or three. He held McNary's impatience in check until Thurston's boats had docked at the store. Then he nodded, and McNary sent their dory edging softly forward.

By the time they had reached the ship, Clint had made up his mind. The deck was still patrolled. Lights were up in the stern cabin, indicating one or more men were there, so a surprise boarding would be impossible.

He signaled McNary to swing around and approach from the seaward side. When the dory was pointed squarely at the ship, Clint moved to the thwart beside McNary.

"Give me one of the oars, Jim," he said quietly. "Pull like hell. The minute we come close enough, get on that deck. Use your gun and use it fast. Soon's the deck's clear, break into that cabin, lift the gold, and get clear before anybody can get out from shore!"

McNary nodded, bending his long back against the pull of the blade in his hands. Clint matched the stroke, and the little dory raced ahead. The distance between them and the ship lessened momentarily—a hundred yards—fifty—thirty— Suddenly a hoarse shout sounded on the deck, and feet pounded the planking.

A pair of guns opened up in wild firing. With a twist of his body, Clint quitted

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the thwart, surrendering his oar to McNary, and leveled his gun. He doubted that he hit either of the watch on deck. but he drove them back from the rail. A moment later the dory snubbed against planking.

Clint caught a trailing piece of cordage, hauled himself upward in a catlike leap, and landed on the deck. Behind him he heard the scuffle of McNary's boots as he came over.

A man shot from shadows under the far rail toward a companionway. Clint dropped him. The companion-way flapped open, a head stuck out. It was hastily withdrawn and the companionway jerked shut. Clint shot through the planking before a latch could be set on the inside and jerked it open again. A man lay at the bottom, clutching a spreading stain in the center of his chest. Clint leaped over him and plunged into the main cabin.

Another man was jacking a shell into a heavy rifle. McNary fired over Clint's shoulder. The man dropped the rifle and fell forward over a table. McNary grunted.

"That makes her, boy," he said. "We got 'em all. Now, where's that dust?"

Clint stood in the center of the room, his elation fading. To make it at all, they had to lift the dust and get away fast. Otherwise, they'd be caught like rats aboard by Thurston's crew, returning hurriedly from the shore. And if they left this cabin in a hurry, they'd go without the gold.

Against a bulkhead, squat and solid, stood an iron safe. McNary leaped across the room, hooking up the last guard's rifle.

"Sizeable chunk of iron all right," he nodded at the safe. Then he caressed the stock of the big rifle. "But this baby was made to deal out some first class wallops!"

He jerked the rifle across his hip and began to lever and fire with amazing speed. Lead whanged against steel and splattered the room. Clint saw blood begin to run from old Jim's face. A red-traced sliver ran across the back of his own hand. Paint chipped and cracked on the face of the safe. The dial wheel clanged angrily and spun under the repeated impact. But the door gave no appearance of cracking. Jim slammed his last shell against it and lowered the gun.

The tumult of that rapid fire in the closed cabin still ran in Clint's ears. Over it, he heard McNary's profane explosion of disappointment.

Then, like a man shot through who falls slowly, the battered dial-wheel rocked uncertainly and dropped to the floor, taking with it a broken piece of door casting and exposing the combination. In moments Clint's swift fingers had rolled the tumblers and swung the door open.

The dust was on the top shelf, neatly pouched in four heavy buckskin bags. Whooping recklessly, Jim McNary seized two of them and raced up the companionway.

He stopped on deck as though to change his grip on the bags. Clint passed him with the other two, dropped into the dory, and was waiting impatiently, oars lifted when Jim swiftly followed.

Off toward the shore, the sound of many men in haste came across the water. Clint could hear the frantic creaking of oar-locks in hard-driven boats. The men at those oars were sailors—they knew how to make a boat travel. Necessarily slower and more clumsy, McNary and himself couldn't match that kind of speed. They had waited too long on board the *Empress!*

"Get the empties out of your gun and get set!" he said grimly over his shoulder.

Behind him, McNary chuckled.

"You're wrong, son," he said. "Reckon they'll fergit about us for a spell. Look over there!"

Lifting his head, Clint saw the whole waist of the *Empress* was seething with flame and that the boats from the shore were heading, not for them, but for the ship in an attempt to save her. He flung an accusing glance at the old buckskin man. McNary grinned.

"Shore! When I come on deck, I seen a keg of lamp-oil sittin' there. I kicked her over, went back for the lamp in the cabin, and tossed her on. That'll keep 'em busy! They'll have somebody watchin' our horses, back to the wharf. But we'll pull out around this little head aways and then go in. The loadin'-pens are there. Delgado'll have a couple of horses and rigs he'll let us take. We'll swing north and chalk us up one clean haul against Ruell Thurston, anyhow!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Grim Fiesta

McNARY was right about getting horses to replace the ones they were forced to leave at the wharf below Bandini's store. They were old animals and the saddles were badly weathered and worn. But they served. McNary also talked the old man at the loading-pens out of a pair of saddle-bags and carefully stowed the four bags of plunder from the *Empress* in them.

As they swung into the deep hills of the Palos Verdes, circling to avoid the main tracks between the harbor and Los Angeles, Ruell Thurston's ship was a bright flaming beacon on the water behind them.

They had hurt Thurston, likely hurt him badly. But it was a long road ahead, yet. The ruin of San Francisquito and the death of King McKenzie called for payment of many hurts like the burning ship.

Neither Clint nor McNary had any doubt as to where they would go. They set their horses north by common accord when they crossed a divide and dropped into wide valley west of the Pueblo Los Angeles. McKenzie's ranch had a strong call in each of them and they rode steadily toward the canyon mouth which led into San Francisquito.

Half a dozen miles from the mission and in mid-afternoon, they saw a body of horsemen swing away from the mission gate, cutting toward the hazing hills of the rancho toward which they, themselves, rode.

That night they tried to slide up the canyon, were driven back, and tried the goat-track further west. Alert guards were posted there also. Clint held back, hoping for the vigilance of the guards to relax. But sun-up found them holed up in a barranca, having been unable to get onto the rancho. When night came, they turned their horses loose, portioned the gold in the saddle-bags between them, and started out on the weary haul over the ridges by which they hoped to circle Thurston's cordon of sentries. When morning came, they were deep into the highlands of the rancho, but several miles from the canyon-head and the main house.

The hills were alive with riders, scanning the open as they rode. In midafternoon a man rode out to the parties on patrol, apparently passing word for them to return to the ranch. Clint watched this development sharply. It was reasonable to suppose that since the burning of the *Empress,* Ruell Thurston's plans had been changed.

Thurston had doubtless intended to clean all the gold he could out of the rancho, then re-man his boat and sail off the California coast. Obviously, sharp as the ship-captain appeared to be, he would know that he couldn't indefinitely hold San Francisquito. He would know that eventually the lethargic *Californios* would get around to forgetting their political troubles long enough to move against him for his bald-faced piracy of the ranch.

With the *Empress* gone, he and his crew would be forced to stay, their escape cut off. And Thurston would have to invent some pretext which would relieve him of responsibility for the ruination of the ranch and old King's murder.

Toward sundown, Clint and McNary slid out of shelter and started boldly across the open. They reached the other side, and in half an hour were on the slope of the hills above the canyon head, between the main house of the rancho and the towering pinnacle of Chimney Rock. By a trick of twilight, the porch of the house loomed up clearly, together with the figures on it. McNary stared intently for a while, then grunted.

"Tarnation! Look, Clint, there's some of King's housemen and vaqueros! Must be fifteen of 'em, and some of the women, too! That's damned funny. Stone had 'em locked up in one of the barns when I was in here before. Something's stirrin', or he wouldn't have turned 'em loose!"

Clint nodded. It looked as though some of the rubble had been cleared up from the lawns fronting the house. He could see two or three stacks of fire-wood heaped up beside shallow pits of the kind *Californios* were accustomed to use at fiesta barbecues.

He was puzzled. Except for the fact that the miners were still spread out through the gutted ruins of the garden, he would have guessed that Rancho San

Francisquito was preparing for a celebration.

"I'd give half the rest of my life to see that little lake backed up there again!" McNary said heavily. "It'd shore cover a lot of mess and make sluicin' gold a tough proposition, even for them sailors!"

Clint grinned appreciation. Turning, his eyes moved across the spire of Chimney Rock towering up one side of the canyon a half mile below the house. His eyes dropped from the rock to the canyon, measuring angles and distance without conscious thought. Suddenly he stood up.

"Jim, if a man could get hold of some powder and had time to drill a few holes in that chunk of sandstone, he could right quick make that lake you were talking about. Blown right, Chimney Rock would make a first-class dam!"

McNary chewed his lips, his eyes making the same measurements. His face brightened.

"Them miners'll have powder, son," he said, "and old Jim McNary's the man that can get it! We won't have to drill no holes, either. The whole base of Chimney Rock is full of 'em, where the creek's been washin' since time started. I'll get me all the powder I can carry and a bushel of fuse. I'll plant her and light her and we'll have us a little party, too! Look, now, there's some caves on this side of the canyon, right under where that first shoulder comes down to make a narrows. You haul these dust-pouches down there and wait for me. I'll see you afore morning!"

Clint stood up, shaking his head. "Leave the dust here in the brush till you've got your charges planted—if you can get the stuff. Then you pick up the pouches and wait for me in the caves."

"Where you going, then?"

"Down to the house. I want to know what's on the fire down there!"

ORD moved in a long circle, taking more than an hour to drop down into the bowl in which the main ranch sprawled. Deepening shadows helped him, and in time he was hunkered down in an ell in the oldest section of the house, near the kitchen. Once or twice in the first hour, he sighted McNary, moving like an Apache toward the shacks and gravel-heaps at the lower end of the diggings. The last time he saw Jim, the mountain man had a stubby keg of black powder under each arm and something which might have been a coil of fuse around his neck.

McNary was in the bed of the canyon, itself, and the miners were moving freely about him. Clint intended to watch, keeping a rifle ready to give the old man what help he could if the going got tough. But a cavalcade which presently wound up the canyon from the direction of the pueblo in the valley drew his attention and held it.

At its fore rode Ruell Thurston and Rosalie. Behind them, her body erect and proud once more, was Doña Inés. The others were Thurston's big Negro, two more of his men, and two women Clint remembered as former servants in King McKenzie's household.

The party swung down before the wide verandah, scant yards from where Clint crouched. Torches had been lit, as had the fires at the barbecuing pits. In the smoky light. Clint saw tears in the eyes of both women.

Thurston bowed low before both of them with exaggerated courtesy. His words came plainly to Clint.

"This is my surprise!" he said. "I give you back your home. I give you back your servants. I regret I cannot also give you back the husband and father you lost, nor those who were killed with him. But Yankees are not magicians. Otherwise, I have done everything I could!"

"Oh, Ruell!" Rosalie's voice was soft. And its gratitude, its unspoken admission of obligation to Thurston vibrated through Clint Ord like a rough-toothed saw. The girl caught sight of the old servants and vaqueros drawn up on the porch and ran toward them with an eager little cry. Doña Inés, as impressed and shaken by her return to her home, was a wiser woman than her daughter. She pressed Ruell Thurston to one side.

"This was not easy, *Capitan,*" she said. "These men, this Ben Stone, they are hard ones to deal with. How was it done? Women must know these things before they can accept!"

(Please turn to page 108)

★ IN THE SADDLE ★

WE'RE often asked how our Western fiction reflects or helps in our War Effort, and we believe that now is a good time to try to answer that question.

During peace times, we tried to bring, through the stories in these pages, a fresh sense of hope and courage to those whose lives may have lacked the zest of high adventure or who—for one reason or another—let themselves be prey to the doubts and fears of an unsettled world.

Today, when those closest to us are engaged in deadly combat so that this nation may live, we realize, more keenly than ever before, our sense of obligation to the men and women who are putting up a real frontiersman's fight—whether in a rolling convoy headed for Torpedo Alley, in a base camp in Africa or in a factory running on a twenty-four hour shift.

We believe that we are helping, first, by furnishing the type of clean, dramatic fiction entertainment that might, for a few hours, recall the glorious struggle and ultimate victory of another time when courage, perseverance, and American "know-how" were needed.

Secondly, we believe that in each of our stories we can find some perhaps forgotten moment of history—our own history. Something to make us stop a moment and say to ourselves, "This is *my* country—my range! It's good land, won at the price of my blood, a land where no man can tell me whom to vote for, where we all, no matter what our creed or religion, have the right to live and breathe in freedom. And no Nazi or Jap is going to take it away from us!"

And we also believe that in many of our stories you may read a deeper message—an underlying theme that expresses the feeling of all of us in this hour of national trial.

For example, it's been said that righteous anger is a pretty fine emotion in such times as these. We think you may be moved to it by Walt Coburn's novel, "Killer Without a Name." It surely doesn't take a great deal of imagination to picture that utterly cold-blooded murderer in a uniform of the *Luftwaffe*, calmly machine-gunning London school-kids. Or being the kind of buck-toothed human hyena who delights in subjecting helpless civilian men and women to degredation and torture. . . .

Then, there's Steve Herrington's short story, "Brotherhood of Battle." That also seems to us to carry a double wallop, for it points out that sometimes our fondest preconceived notions are not always the right ones. Dushane, the Texan, hated Villa and his band, until he learned that the immortal *revolutionista* and his ragged outfit were fighting for the same thing for which Dushane's ancestors fought and bled—freedom!

And there's another short story in this issue—one that we call off-trail, because it must carry enough sheer, human dramatic value to compensate for other certain conventional fiction requirements. . . .

But we'll think you'll be interested in hearing from the author, Harry F. Olmsted:

I am under no illusions about the enclosed yarn. It is not a true Western, in the generally accepted interpretation. There is no hero, no villain, no guns, no horses, no slam-bang ebb and flow of fortune. Nothing but one hell of a problem to be solved in the face of tremendous odds. I believe it is a story.

Some years ago, after extremely hazardous effort, I got myself onto such a ledge as I describe in "Rope Trick." As I rested, a little awed by the tremendous spectacle of ageless erosion all about me, I wondered what my thoughts and feelings would be if, right before my eyes, another mass of rock should let go, taking out the precarious series of footholds by which I had ascended, and without which there could be no descending.

Hunkered there, five hundred feet almost sheer above the flat where the rest of the party looked like pygmies, I experienced perhaps some of the pangs Tex Hudlin must have known. And while I pored over the works left there by a race long vanished, the thought lived on, and I gave way to it.

In my mind, I unraveled my clothing with the bone awl I had found. I unearthed quite a little supply of ancient twine and mentally calculated how much the ruin would give up. In fancy I wove a rope, made it secure to a beam within the old house and let myself down, step by step.

And always since, there has been with me an echo of the struggle I went through in balancing my two great problems—economy of material which must prove adequate for the length of rope needed and making the line heavy enough to bear my weight.

I have also tried to draw a parallel, or to symbolize, in this story the sense of impotence, anger and pity that must seize any patriotic man or woman when he or she observed self-centered, venal people obstructing any part of the war effort through unwillingness to see their own plans or hopes dislocated.

In writing this, I was not interested in the details of slow starvation. The tragedy of worthy, courageous, self-sacrificing people menaced in their freedom by others who did not appreciate that freedom and were unwilling to work for it—that was my theme.

I hope I have succeeded. . . .

Harry F. Olmsted.

In next month's issue, Harry Olmsted will make another appearance, this time with a powerfully dramatic full-length novel of the Wyoming cattle frontier. Walt Coburn, too, will tell of a strange gunsmoke cure for a bronc-buster who played one too many practical jokes on the Cross Up range. . . . Plus an unusually varied assortment of other long and short stories which, we believe, will bring home to all of us why and what we're fighting for!

The May issue will be published March 31st!

—THE EDITORS

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(Continued from page 106)

Thurston chuckled. With Rosalie out of hearing, his courtesy fled.

"Anything can be done with money," he said. "Anything! Ben Stone wouldn't listen to a proposition to leave the ranch. But I made a deal with him. My ship burned in the harbor. With the cash from my insurance on her, I bought half interest in his claim. We will build a wall across below the lawns down there, and you can forget the gold-camp beyond it!"

"There are things an old woman never forgets, *Capitan,*" Doña Inés reminded Thurston gently. "You say *we* shall do all these things . . . ?"

Thurston nodded, smiling confidently.

Doña Inés shrugged her shoulders. "I understand. You have heard Rosalie's oath that she will not marry until she is mistress of this house again. That is why you have brought us here! I do not approve. This is not a McKenzie's way to win back a home. But I have tried to give Rosalie wisdom and pride. I will do nothing, now. You must deal with her."

Thurston's grin grew wider. He pushed his hat back with evident relief.

"You're a smart old woman!" he said in plain admiration. "I thought I'd have trouble with you!"

Doña Inés smiled. "I'm a prideful old woman," she corrected him gently. "And I did not promise you I would be of no trouble! Only that you must deal with Rosalie for what belongs to Rosalie!"

Thurston's grin vanished. He turned shortly away from King McKenzie's wife, moving angrily off toward the sluice-beds. Doña Inés turned for the first time toward the house and the loyal friends who had been her servants.

Clint Ord straightened in his hiding-place. Thurston was a wise hombre. He had shifted his plans neatly to include the burning of the *Empress.* This fiesta, this celebration at San Francisquito, was planned to mark his wedding. Once he was married to Rosalie, no power ever to come in the Californias would dislodge him from the rancho and the gold in its canyon!

A reckless shadow, now, taut with a bitter anger which drove forward with scant caution, Clint Ord slid along the

wall of the house toward a doorway. He aimed to see Rosalie, and until he did, sailor or miner or renegade captain couldn't stop him!

CHAPTER FIVE

Showdown

CLINT slid in a door, moving through a pantryway into a corridor leading to the back of the house. At the back of this hall, Ruell Thurston's big Negro was slouched beside a closed door. Instinct, rather than knowledge, told Clint Rosalie was there. For a moment he thought he would be able to come up behind the big guard. But the man started to pivot.

Still a pair of yards away, Clint threw his gun, underhand. The spinning weapon hit the man on the side of the head, just forward of his ear. He sighed and dropped. Clint hooked his hand in the collar of the guard's jacket and dragged the limp carcass after him, into the room.

Rosalie was beside full length windows on the outer wall. Her lips were tight, her face pallid, and her eye fastened in a terrible, hopeless loathing on a point to Clint's right. Clint dropped his inert burden and wheeled in a crouch, his gun coming up.

Two shots snapped at him in unison, but he was under both. He triggered twice without aim at the pair of men against the wall. He missed Ruell Thurston, only stinging the man with chipped plaster. But Ben Stone folded his hands across the roundness of his belly and fell.

Clint's fleeting glimpse of Rosalie's face as he burst in the door told him much. Apparently Thurston, believing he couldn't longer hold his masquerade as benefactor and honest friend, had brought his lieutenant, Stone, in to back him up; had faced Rosalie with the facts, and had tried to brow-beat her into marriage as the only way she could regain her father's ranch. There was, after this, nothing more Clint could tell the girl, now.

Thurston was clawing plaster dust from his eyes, swinging his gun. Clint leaped for the window. Rosalie flashed past him, running in the other direction.

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As Clint reached the window, he heard the impact of the girl's body against Thurston and the man's savage oath of frustration. Thurston's gun fired, but Rosalie had knocked it out of line, and Clint cleared the sash untouched. He landed heavily in brush, tumbled out, and raced for the creek-bed.

Thurston set up a warning shout and appeared a moment later on the verandah. Doña Inés stopped him with an alarmed question. The man thrust her roughly out of his way and ran out into the yard, bellowing for some of his men. Directly a squad of them gathered and they shot around the house toward the shattered window.

Clint raised up from his hiding place along the water's edge. He disliked leaving the women alone with the helpless servants. The ship captain obviously intended to marry Rosalie tonight. But until the vows were said and Thurston's claim to San Francisquito settled permanently, the women were safe. It was better that Clint locate McNary, make certain the old man had his powder set, and to plan a way to stop the wedding.

Twice Clint lay in the grass while hurrying miners passed him. There seemed to be an excitement among the sluices which was unconnected with anything which had happened at the house.

But Ord was unable to find out what it was.

In twenty minutes, he had found the rendezvous Jim had named earlier and had joined McNary at the caves across the canyon from the tower of Chimney Rock.

"We're set, son!" McNary breathed. "Two kegs of powder set where they'll do the most good. A long string of fuse on 'em, and lighted! Twenty-thirty minutes till they blow. I was seen, gettin' across from the rock. I dodged free and got to where we'd left them bags of dust off the ship. Started back in here and got picked up again. I run ahead of that bunch, but they'll foller me in. Fact is, I thought it was them when I heard you comin'! Better get a full magazine, boy. We'll have company directly!"

A moment later a stir downslope drew the sights of both men, but a slender

figure with flowing hair was running brokenly toward them. Clint sprang down to meet her, carried her back.

"Rosalie!"

"Clint! I thought I'd never find you. They're coming. They're like locoed coyotes. They've found out there's no more gold in the canyon. It was only a pocket and it's worked out. Ruell had gone entirely crazy. Mother and the servants and the vaqueros are hiding in the wine-cellar. Ruell knows you have the gold taken from his ship here. Somebody saw Jim bring it in. They're coming, Clint!"

McNary spat. "Miss, Clint an' me have been hopin' somethin' like this'd happen. Now, don't you spoil it fer us!"

Rosalie shivered. "I think Ruell wants me more than he wants the gold!" she said in a dead voice. Clint's eyes were stabbing downslope.

"No banker'd take his chance for cash!" he said, and he pulled the trigger.

Answering lead struck back, whanging hollowly into the cavern at their backs. Clint studied the force below over his rifle-sights, firing as targets showed. Thurston was there, but not his whole force.

Clint was troubled, but the explanation came soon enough. Firing broke out spitefully near the house. It was answered with a wave of heavier sound Clint had not heard for years. McNary grunted astonishment.

"Muzzle-loaders!" he barked. "Cap-an-ball babies! What the devil!"

It was Rosalie who fitted it together. "Mother!" she cried out. "She's opened dad's old trophy-cases and handed out the guns to the vaqueros!" Her voice broke. "Dad would have liked this . . . !"

For an instant it seemed that old King McKenzie, himself, bluff and vital, was stalking the battle-torn canyon, taking a personal hand in ridding his ranch of the wolves which had hamstrung it. The shadow of a giant remains impressed a long time on those who knew him and were his friends. . . .

THIS new resistance crimped Thurston's attack. The renegade chief himself risked the fire from the cave to run up toward the house. But he

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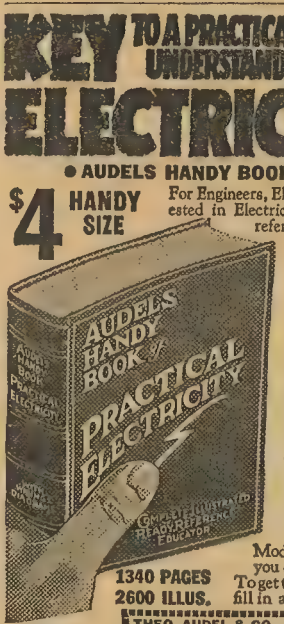

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met his men, being pressed back. They milled into a rubble of boulders in the center of the canyon, caught. McNary reached into a pocket for another heap of shells.

"They'll charge us, now," he said grimly. "Every man-Jack of them comin' like Satan hisself. If we can turn 'em, we've won. If we can't, we're dead turkeys—and no stuffing!"

Clint surrendered his rifle to Rosalie and raised his hand-gun, his mind making practical measurements as the renegades broke from shelter and started desperately up the slope.

There was no way in the world the three of them could stop that charge. Clint reached out for Rosalie's hand. Even Jim McNary lowered his rifle without firing, his face looking suddenly aged with hopelessness.

But all of them had reckoned without the relentless run of time, the steady ticking off of minutes on a length of burning fuse. Just as Thurston's men were spread from shelter, the earth under them shook. A dull, rumbling sound began across the canyon. Then, about the roots of Chimney Rock, the fires of hell gushed out, fringed by a thick billow of powder-smoke. The sandstone pinnacle itself rose intact into the air. Very slowly, it broke in the middle, tilted, and began to fall with majestic slowness into the canyon.

The renegade crew stared, broke, then ran madly, relentlessly being overtaken by the great mass bearing down on them. Ruell Thurston stood motionless, then shook his rifle over his head at those up the slope.

Then, with an impact which dazed the senses, which flung rubble and powdered stone far up the slope and even into the cave, Chimney Rock settled across the canyon floor, across the running men and running stream like a final curtain. The powder charge had been placed right.

There presently would be a lake behind that heap of rubble which would hide the scars on the lush land of San Francisquito.

Clint Ord tightened his arm about the trembling, shaken girl beside him.

The sun was warm and gentle in the

patio of the old house. *Paisanos* were already making the first plantings in Doña Inés' new garden. Beyond them, rubbing at trim new corral poles, good horses were penned again. Housewomen moved through the rooms at Clint's back, giggling in anticipation of the fiesta for which they prepared.

Clint leaned forward, smiling at Padre Roldan, who had been Doña Inés' choice. All else about the fiesta belonged to them and they wanted her to have a part. It was only right that she, the mother, should choose the man who would say their vows to them. But like all men of the Church who see a new life beginning, the good father had his words of advice and caution, there in the quiet afternoon.

"You are a man built to a good pattern, my son," he said approvingly. "I have no fears for the happiness of Rosalia. But San Francisquito—ah, señor! That is something else! It is not enough to be a man of big body and a level eye to take the place of King McKenzie on this rancho. Here grow the most beautiful horses in half a world. They must continue to grow! But a man must have a little horse in his blood, I believe, to be *haciendado* here!"

Across the patio, Jim McNary crossed his long legs and grinned at Padre Roldan. "This younker, Padre," McNary said, "was whinnyin' afore he could walk or talk!"

The good father laughed relief. Clint let his eyes wander across the hills and dun valleys of the domain. It was a great responsibility, and he knew it, to sit in a chair worn comfortable by a man of King McKenzie's stature. But the knowledge that he could do it creditably and well with the help of a wife, a mother, and a friend, who had also been McKenzie's friend, filled him with a strong and quiet eagerness.

Doña Inés came out of the house.

"Señores," she said gently, "it is mid-afternoon. If you are ready, Father Roldan, it is time. Rosalia waits. And San Francisquito has been long enough without a master!"

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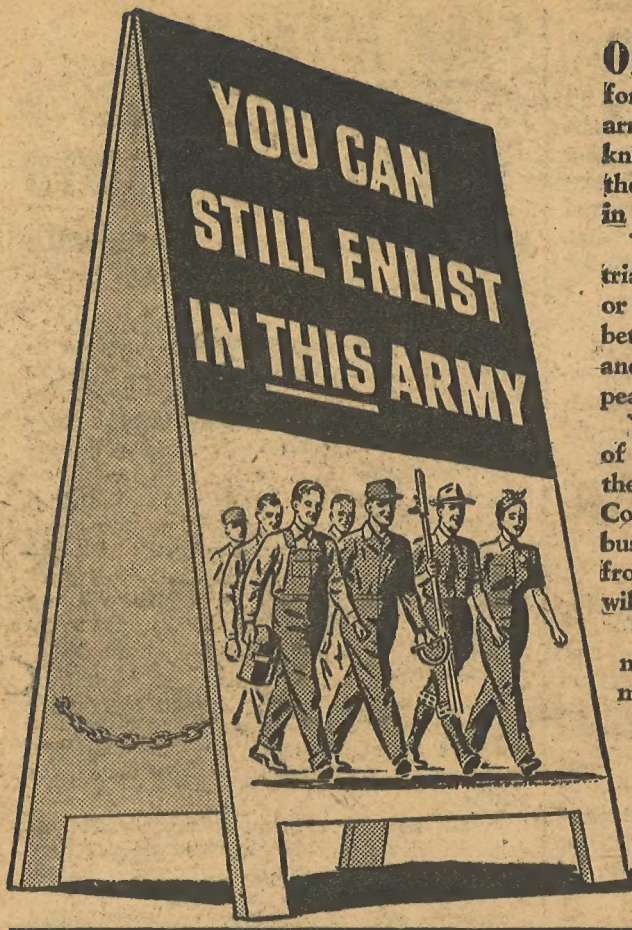

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